

## No Sanctuary by leighwrites

**Category:** IT (2017), IT - Stephen King, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** F/F, F/M, M/M

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Georgie Denbrough, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Probably some people I forgot to actually tag, Reginald "Belch" Huggins, Richie Tozier, Some lovely OCs, Stanley Uris, Steve Harrington, Victor Criss, Wentworth Tozier, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Stanley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, bunch of others maybe... probably

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**Summary:**

[Sequel to Just Survive Somehow].

Heading to Atlanta was supposed to be easy. They were supposed to get there and help with the creation of a cure at the CDC. Things are never that simple, and there's always something in the way from the ravenous undead to survivors with less than friendly intentions.

## 1. The Divide

The moon hung high in the dark inky blackness of the sky, casting an eerie glow against the woodland that stretched out under it. The sound of hungry snarls echoed through the dense line of trees, almost completely covering the sound of thudding footsteps as a set of feet slammed against the ground, crunching leaves and twigs under them as they moved.

Torn sneakers kicked up dirt and leaves, the tall figure stumbling as they tripped over a tree root, their arms tightening around the legs curled tightly around their waist. They stopped for a moment, adjusting the smaller companion on their back before continuing on their way; focusing on anything but the zombies that were no doubt closing in on them.

Eddie Kaspbrak's body shook as he coughed, burying his face into Richie's neck to muffle the sound. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. They should have been halfway to Atlanta by now. Richie came to a halt, carefully sliding Eddie from his back and propping him against a tree. He removed his hoody and took the backpack from Eddie, tugging the zombie scented material over the smaller boy before sliding the bag straps back onto his shoulders.

"Hold on for me a little longer, okay Eds?"

Eddie nodded weakly, bringing a sleeve covered hand to his mouth to cough again. Richie tugged the hood over Eddie's head and turned, crouching for Eddie to get back on. Eddie stumbled forward and slid his arms around Richie's neck while Richie reached back and grabbed his legs, hoisting them back around his waist as he stood.

And then he was running through the dense trees again.

The snarling slowly began to die out as Richie shoved his way through bushes and ducked carefully under low hanging branches. The hoody shield seemed to be working; his own inhuman scent covering Eddie's enough that the zombies stopped following them. Eddie buried his face into Richie's shoulder, biting down as he tried to hold back a cough that still forced its way out; the noise muffled in

Richie's shirt.

Eddie barely registered when they'd broken the treeline and Richie had dashed across a dark road and through an iron gate. He didn't notice that Richie was running through rows of tombstones, and he *definitely* didn't notice when Richie had kicked a door open and carried him into a funeral home.

The only thing he *was* aware of was the sudden silence. It was a nice change of contrast from the snarls and the wind.

Richie turned and nudged the door shut with his foot, backing into the quiet of the building. Finally he could breathe. Eddie was safe. He carried him carefully into the nearest room, grimacing at the coffins that were laid out for people to choose from. Carefully, he propped Eddie into a sitting position against a wall and set to work on taking out the soft padding from the coffins, laying them out into a makeshift bed on the ground.

"Richie!?" Eddie sounded panicked, and Richie turned sharply, crawling quickly over to the barely conscious form of Eddie as he coughed again. "Ri—"

"I'm right here." Richie reached out, carefully pressing a hand to Eddie's cheek. His face was far too hot, and when Richie moved his hand to Eddie's forehead, he drew it back quickly. Eddie was running a fever, and Richie *couldn't* leave him alone to look for medicine while he was like this.

"I... I couldn't feel you anymore." Eddie glanced up at him, eyes unfocused. "I thought —"

"It's okay Eds. I'm not going anywhere."

Hordes were a relentless force of nature. Zombies didn't care if you were tired or hungry. They didn't get hungry. They didn't sleep. They just kept on going like a hurricane; destroying everything and everyone in their path.

Stan slammed the butt of his sniper into the head of an oncoming runner, and the moment it hit the ground, he was bashing the sniper

down into its skull until it cracked. He was tired, dirty, hungry, and restless. It was a terrible combination. To make things worse; he was lost.

“Stan come on!” Bill hissed, grabbing his hand and tugging him further down the dark road.

They’d seen Richie and Eddie heading in this direction when the horde had come storming out of the trees like a parade, but so far they hadn’t seen either of them. Stan wondered if Richie had veered off into the trees, but part of him knew that was stupid. Richie was taking care of a sick Eddie. There was no way that he’d endanger him by running off in the direction the horde had come from.

Bill came to a halt near an abandoned car, panting for breath. They were both tired, and sooner or later their bodies would drop, unable to stay awake any longer, and they would fall to sleep right there in the road. That was dangerous. They couldn’t just sleep there. Bill turned to the car and popped the trunk, taking out his knife to remove the lock while Stan kept watch.

“Get in.” Bill said, nodding his head towards the trunk.

Stan checked around them one last time before handing his sniper rifle to Bill and climbing into the SUV’s trunk, scooting as far back as possible. Bill passed him the gun and Stan shifted awkwardly to pace it behind him before taking Bill’s gun too and doing the same. Bill climbed into the trunk and sat up to grab the top, pulling it down as he lowered himself onto his back.

Stan turned on his flashlight so Bill could see what he was doing as he removed his belt, looping it through the holes where the lock for the trunk had previously been and tightening it as much as he could; botching a hold into the leather and fastening the belt into place. Bill rolled over to face him, face illuminated by the flashlight which Stan set between them.

“Is that gonna hold?”

Bill sighed, glancing back over his shoulder. “I hope so. We’ll know for sure if a zombie rips it open overnight.”

“Do you think Richie and Eddie are okay?”

“Richie would do anything to protect Eddie. The first thing he did when that horde showed up was grab him and run.”

“And the others?”

Bill leaned forward, attaching his mouth to Stan’s in a light kiss. “I’m sure they’re safe too, Stan. We just need to focus on keeping ourselves safe for now. We stay safe for now, and we can find them tomorrow.”

“Right. I’m just –”

Bill moved the flashlight, shifting closer to Stan and curling an arm around his waist. “I know Stan. I’m worried about them all too. As soon as we’re both awake tomorrow we’ll look for them. I promise.”

That was enough for Stan.

Beverly stumbled down a sloped area of the forest, her feet suddenly flying from under her. Clutching her shotgun to her chest, she rolled painfully through dirt, grass, rocks, and twigs down the steep area of land; sending her vision swimming. She came to a stop when she hit the bottom of a tree where the ground levelled out again, letting out a groan of pain at the feeling of a rock digging into her lower back.

“Beverly!” Vic’s voice sounded far away despite the fact she could see both him and Georgie running down the slope with her blurry vision; not all that far away from her.

Georgie reached her first after he stumbled, almost falling over in the process himself, and the bright yellow reflective hoody shone in the moonlight as he stood over her. His face was twisted into an expression of worry as he held out a hand to her which she shakily took; barely registering the blood on her hand from where she’d cut open her knuckles.

“Are you okay?” Georgie asked, checking her over for any serious injuries.

Beverly smiled at his almost-mothering. “I’m a little achy but I’m

good.”

Vic reached them, panting to get his breath back. “What happened back there?”

“I was running from some of the horde, jumpers, and the next thing I knew... the ground was sloping and I was falling.”

“We’re not getting back to the others that way.” Vic said, looking up at the slope with his brow furrowed. “We need to follow the ridge and find a place where it levels out and then circle back to the highway.”

“In *this*?” Georgie asked, motioning around them with a wave of his hand. “It’s too dark, Vic. We’re just gonna get turned around and trip over each other. We need to find a place to rest until it gets light.”

“*Where*?” Vic hissed, looking around them. “There’s nowhere to stop. We’re just live bait out here.”

“I saw a building when we were coming down.” Georgie pointed in the direction of the tree that had stopped Beverly. “Over there somewhere.”

Beverly and Vic exchanged a glance, but Georgie was already heading through the trees, forcing them to follow him. A few minutes passed and they stumbled out onto a road, Beverly’s breath catching in her throat as she stared at the building across from them.

A church. It was small, surrounded by a white picket fence with a bus parked off to the side. Vic traded his pistol for his knife and jogged across the road to the door. He stood to the left of them and Beverly stood to the right with her machete, Georgie reaching out and pushing the door open. Only silence greeted them.

The three of them stepped inside, the floorboards creaking under their feet. Vic closed the doors behind them while Beverly crossed the church; feet thumping quietly against the floor as she walked between the rows of dusty pews.

“Have you seen this?” Georgie asked from across the church, his flashlight pointed at the wall. Beverly turned to where Georgie stood,

staring at the bloody words that had been written onto the wall under one of the stained glass windows.

## **BEWARE THE HUNTERS.**

Nancy climbed the crash barrier of the highway awkwardly with some help from Ben while Max kept watch of the area of woodland. Lucas jumped into the bed of the truck and then hoisted himself onto the roof. He fiddled with the scope on his sniper for a moment, raising it to his face now that he had the night vision turned on to look around them.

“Shit, this was *not* supposed to happen to us.” Max said, shining her flashlight at the cars around them as though their friends were already back and in them. “We were supposed to get to Atlanta, get cured, get a cure, and then take it back to Hawkins for the people at the hospital. We were *not* supposed to end up scattered all over the place like this. We don’t have a clue on where anyone else is.”

“We’ll find them.” Ben released Nancy, heading for the truck. “They can’t have gone too far in the dark.”

“I say we just stay here and wait for them to come back to us.” Nancy opened the mini-van and reached in for her shotgun, pulling the strap over her shoulder. “When it gets light... they’ll probably circle back to the highway since they’ll have better vision. It’s too dark for them to find their way back. It’s easy to get turned around in a forest.”

“So we rest and we wait.” Lucas said; still keeping an eye on the dark highway ahead of him. “We don’t leave anyone behind no matter what.”

“Right. I’ll keep watch with Lucas. Ben, Max; you two get some rest for now and we’ll wake you in a few hours to trade shifts. If there’s a problem, we’ll shout for you.”

Ben leaned up against the truck, arms crossed against his chest. “You think I can sleep right now? Beverly’s out there somewhere and I don’t know if she’s alone or with someone... or alive or dead. My *friends* are out there too; the people I’ve survived most of this with. The only people I know that *aren’t* completely alone right now are

Richie and Eddie. I thought the highway was supposed to be *safe*?”

Max heaved a sigh, shoving her pistol back into its holster. “I guess with the food scarce in the cities they’re migrating now. This place is practically a red zone. We shouldn’t –”

“We’re not leaving.” Nancy said; her tone final. “What if they all come back tomorrow and we’re not here? We can’t just *leave*.”

“And what if they *don’t* come back? It’s like Ben said. We don’t know if the others are safe with each other or alive or dead. They could have fallen to that horde. You saw the size of it! There were easily fifty zombies *minimum*.”

“I’m *not* giving up on them, Max. Listen, you’re *more* than welcome to leave whenever you want, but it’ll be alone.”

“I’m not saying to just leave them. I’m saying we should find a place to hold down and point the in the right direction. We have to make sure *we’re* alive too. They’d do the same if it was them.”

“Richie and Bill wouldn’t.” Ben said. “They would stay here and wait for us to show up. They wouldn’t leave without everyone, and we shouldn’t either.”

“We’re gonna get ourselves killed if we just stay here on this highway.”

“Not if we’re careful.” Lucas reasoned, lowering himself to sit on the truck roof. “We stick together. We watch each other’s backs, and two of us keep watch a time.”

Steve yanked his bat backwards, dislodging the nails from the head of the zombie he’d disposed of with a sickening squelch. He glanced over his shoulder to where Mike was keeping watch by one of the trees and Jane had her flashlight pointed low, only illuminating the area around their feet to make sure no one tripped over anything.

The highway couldn’t be *that* far away from them by now. They’d been following the position of the moon for the last two hours. The highway had to be close to where they were.



“Damn it. These things just don’t give up.” Steve flicked the bat side to side, pieces of brain and flesh flicking onto the ground at his feet.

“I think we might be lost.” Jane said, moving the flashlight from one hand to the other. “Did we... did we get turned around in here? Everything just looked the same. We should have been back at the highway by now.”

“We’ll get there. I’ll get us there.” Steve shouldered the bat and looked around before veering off to the right. “It should be this way. Come on.”

Mike waited until Jane was between himself and Steve before he followed them, keeping an eye on the area of woods behind them for any signs of zombies. Jane kept her flashlight on the ground, carefully following Steve’s feet as they walked; dead leaves crunching under them.

A twig snapped, the sound echoing around and Mike raised his gun, pointing it off to their left as the sound of footsteps neared them. Steve quickly drew his pistol, pointing it in the same direction as Mike’s; Jane raising her flashlight.

A bloodied Will broke through the darkness and Jane dropped the flashlight to her feet, throwing her arms around him. Will stumbled from the sudden hug before he returned it, clutching at Jane.

“Will? Are you alone?” Steve lowered his pistol, slowly returning it to the waistband of his jeans.

“No.” Will looked back over his shoulder in the direction he’d come from. “Belch and Dustin are back there. They told me to run while they dealt with the horde.”

Steve tightened the hold on his bat. “Alright, let’s go and help them and get back to the highway before everyone leaves us behind in this damn forest.”

“I really don’t think they’d leave us.” Jane said, releasing Will. “We’ll get back to the highway and they’ll all be there waiting for us.”

“If they made it back, you mean. There were a lot of zombies and

everyone scattered. We have to at least think of the possibility that some of us might... might not have made it.”

“Nope!” Jane sounded oddly cheerful, taking Will’s hand and dragging him back in the direction he’d come from. “They’re tough.”

Steve bent to pick up the flashlight, Jane’s words ringing in his head. *They’re tough...* He suddenly remember his mother, standing with her back to him as she raised her shotgun, standing shoulder to shoulder with Karen Wheeler.

*“Take my children and go, Steve! Keep them safe.”*

*“What about you? I can’t just leave the two of you here!”*

*Karen Wheeler looked back at him over her shoulder; cocking her shotgun in an almost threatening manner as the cluster of zombies began to close in. “We’ll be fine. Mom’s are tough.”*

## 2. Infection

*“I hate this.”*

*Richie looked down at the sudden sound of Eddie’s strained voice, offering a comforting smile to the man whose head was in his lap while running his fingers carefully through his hair. It had been three days since Eddie had gotten sick, prompting Eddie and Richie to trade places in the car with Stan and Bill; Georgie had opted to join Beverly and Ben in their car instead so that Eddie could actually rest while they were on the move.*

*Stan was currently driving, his fingers tapping lightly against the steering wheel in a rhythm only he seemed to know while Bill opened the glove compartment now that Eddie was awake again and retrieved the bottle of medicine they’d managed to get from a pharmacy in the last town they’d passed through. Twisting in his seat, he handed the bottle over to Richie who nudged Eddie to make him sit up.*

*Eddie complied sluggishly while Richie unscrewed the cap from the bottle, handing the glass container to Eddie who grimaced at the smell before swigging back some of the liquid and handing the bottle back. Richie screwed the cap back on and handed the bottle back to Bill, gently ruffling at Eddie’s hair.*

*Eddie groaned and dropped back down to lie across the seat, his head thumping against Richie’s lap. Richie adjusted the blanket back over him, cocooning Eddie into the fluffy material before he returned to stroking his fingers through his hair. Eddie rolled onto his side, nuzzling his face into Richie’s stomach with a soft sigh.*

*“Cute, cute –”*

*Richie woke to light filtering into the funeral home through the gaps between the wooden planks that someone had hammered over windows to try and fortify the building, taking in a moment to enjoy the rarity that was peace in a world where everything wanted to eat you. Eddie was still sleeping curled into his front, breathing somewhat laboured from his sickness, and he absolutely hated seeing Eddie in this condition.*

He hated not being able to help him.

He hated –

*Devour* –

That damn voice that clawed its way through his mind every time he was near anyone.

Richie carefully detached himself from Eddie and stood, stretching out his limbs with a yawn. The silence outside suggested that nothing had found them yet, but the chances of that lasting were slim. He had to get Eddie back to the others where there was *actually* medicine but he couldn't move him like this. Eddie was pretty much deadweight and he couldn't carry him *and* fight off the zombies that might come across them.

Eddie stirred and Richie's attention zeroed in on him. Eddie's brow furrowed, a look of displeasure coming to his face as he reached out and groped the empty space beside him; searching for the absent Richie. Richie crossed the room and carefully laid back down on their makeshift bed, taking Eddie's hand and threading their fingers together.

"Where'd you go?" Eddie mumbled sleepily, scooting across the space between them until he could bury his face into Richie's chest.

Richie ran a thumb against the back of Eddie's hand soothingly, nuzzling his nose against the top of his head; complete with a kiss. "I just needed to stretch a little after all that running yesterday."

"I'm sorry." Eddie muttered against his chest.

Richie sighed. "You didn't do anything wrong, Eddie. You can't help being sick. The main thing is that you're safe now."

Eddie slid an arm around him, fingers curling into the back of Richie's shirt. "Thank you for getting me away from there."

Richie smiled. "Anytime Eds. You feel well enough to take a bath? It'll help your fever."

“Is there even a bath in this place?”

“We’re in a funeral home, love, they have one for cleaning up the bodies.”

Eddie scrunched his nose, and Richie thought he was about to protest before he let out a soft sigh and nodded. “Yeah – okay – bath.”

Richie slowly climbed to his feet and then helped Eddie up to his own. When Eddie teetered on the spot, Richie steadied him, planting his hands firmly onto his shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’ll help you.”

Richie was careful as he led Eddie through the funeral home, carefully shouldering open the door to the embalming room. He was thankful that he’d been right. There was a large tub at the end of the room, and Richie hoisted Eddie up onto a nearby table so he could focus on filling the tub for him while simultaneously trying to make some kind of sense as to where the horde had come from. They hadn’t even heard the shuffling of their footsteps or any form of snarls when one of them had grabbed Max before Lucas had put an end to its reanimated state.

And the look in their eyes was so damn predatory. It wasn’t like with the zombies in the forestry. They moved almost human like. They didn’t snarl. Like they were built for hunting them.

The highest intelligence he’d seen in the zombies yet.

“Richie.” Eddie spoke quietly, his voice raspy from the burn in his throat. “Do you... do you think the others are okay?”

Richie stared at the water that was filling the tub. “Are you kidding me, Eds? They have Bill and Steve. They’re gonna be fine. Beverly’s pretty fuckin’ adept at killing those things too.”

“Yeah – yeah you’re right. They’re gonna be fine.”

Shutting off the tub, Richie approached the table and grabbed the bottom of Eddie’s shirt. “Arms up Eds.”

Eddie raised his arms sluggishly and Richie pulled the shirt up over his head, his eyes instantly zeroing in on a patch of Eddie’s left

shoulder as the man lowered his arms back to his sides to grip the table in an effort to stay upright. Richie's throat seized and his heart slowed. There, planted firmly on Eddie's shoulder, were a series of indentations; stained red from where the bite mark had been bleeding out.

Richie checked over the bloodied shirt in his hand in a panic, finding the holes that would line up perfectly with the marks on Eddie's shoulder.

The fever. The sudden overly sluggish movements. Being unable to keep himself upright alone. It made sense now. They were the signs of someone who had been bitten. He'd *seen* this at the evacuation centre.

How the hell had he missed it in Eddie when all the signs were there?

"Wait here – don't move – just – stay!" Richie said, voice panicked and he turned and ran from the room, leaving a confused Eddie behind.

*Richie hit the forest floor with a thud as the silent zombie tackled him to the ground, lashing out at him and clawing at his front. His smell couldn't hide him from this zombie. This zombie was like a feral. **It knew.** Richie shoved back, forcing the zombie off him as he grabbed his knife and then lunged for the zombie, slamming the tip of the knife down into its head.*

*He scrambled to his feet, finding Eddie in the dark at the base of a tree where he was struggling with one of the shamblers that was snapping its teeth at him in an effort to try and bite him. Eddie was too sick to keep up the fight. Eddie was –*

*Richie darted across the clearing and grabbed the back of the zombie's shirt; yanking it away from Eddie and tossing it to one side. He didn't stop to put an end to the zombie. He shoved his arms under Eddie, hoisted him up and once again he ran. He needed to get him somewhere safe. It was just the two of them.*

*He needed to keep Eddie safe. He needed –*

Richie rummaged through his backpack back in the room they'd slept

in, hunting out the capped syringe of green and red liquid that Vic had given him back at the hospital. Clutching it in one hand, Richie ran back to the embalming room where Eddie was clutching at the table desperately; breathing ragged.

He'd only been bitten the day before. A bite took three to four days. Eddie was going to be fine as long as he did this now.

Eddie's head snapped up at the sound of the door slamming shut behind Richie; his gaze unfocused. "Richie –"

Richie didn't respond, uncapping the syringe with his mouth. *Keep Eddie safe. Keep Eddie alive. Eddie wouldn't want to become one of those things. Eddie wouldn't want anyone to see him like one of those things.*

Richie shoved Eddie back on the table, ignoring the shout of surprise that came from him as he hit the wooden surface; slamming the needle down into his chest and pushing down until the syringe was completely empty. He pulled the syringe back, tossing it to the side now that he had no use for it, the glass shattering when it hit the floor.

When Stan woke, it was oddly light. It took him a moment to fully wake up, realising that the trunk of the car he'd spent the sleeping in was open now, and Bill was sitting right at the edge, legs hooked out of the trunk as he kept watch. Stan stretched the best he could in the small space, shifting into the wider space where he could sit up properly next to Bill who had his sniper resting across his lap.

"It was quiet when I woke up so I opened the trunk." Bill glanced to Stan, a soft smile coming to his face. "Your hair is a mess in a morning. Did you know that?"

"Well it's not like I can tame it right now." Stan defended, reaching back into the trunk for his own sniper and the flashlight. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You needed the sleep, Stan. You did most of the driving lately despite me offering. Now that you're awake, let's go find Richie and Eddie."

“Yeah.” Stan hopped out of the trunk and stretched, pulling the strap of the sniper over his shoulder. “We can’t trust them alone for too long. Richie might do something stupid. Which way do we go?”

“Well...” Bill stood, looking around them. “We’ve established they’re not still on the highway so... forest? But... do we go left or right?”

Stan furrowed his brow. “The horde came from the right. Richie would have gone left.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive Bill. Richie wouldn’t have had time to stop and make a zombie shield for Eddie with a horde on their asses. He would have gone left where the horde *didn’t* come from to find a safe place to hide until Eddie is better. I know Richie. I know how his mind works when he’s in flight mode.”

Bill nodded, trusting Stan’s judgement, and the two of them hopped the crash barrier and set off in the woodland. Bill turned sharply and slammed his gun against an oncoming zombie; shoving it onto the ground before the broke into a run.

The zombies could wait. Eddie and Richie couldn’t.

“Stan.” Bill hissed, nodding his head at a fallen zombie with a hole in the middle of its forehead. “Someone came through here.”

Stan looked down at the dead zombie. “Yeah. Do you think –”

“It might be. We can’t be sure. It could have been any of our friends. Even –”

*Stan shoved a zombie back with his arm, pinning it against the truck, twisting his knife and slamming it into the creature’s head. As he turned to look at the others, he was met with the sight of Georgie hopping the crash barrier and following a mane of flowing red hair.*

Stan reached over, lacing his hand with Bill’s and tugging him forward through the trees. “He’s gonna be fine Bill. I saw him. He jumped the barrier after Beverly. They’ll be together. I don’t know if anyone else went with them, but *they* at least, will be together.”



“Yeah – yeah. They’re fine. Georgie survived on his own for days in Hawkings.”

“Exactly. He’ll come back to you and drag some of our friends with him.”

They broke the treeline, being careful to check the area for any zombies, Stan nudging Bill sharply in the side as he spotted something down the road.

“Ow. Stan, what –” Bill followed Stan’s gaze, spotting what he was looking at. “Is that a –”

“Funeral home? Yeah.” Stan was already heading towards it.

Bill jogged after him, grabbing his arm. “Just because there’s a building, it doesn’t mean someone we know is in there. We have to be careful. Just in case –”

“I know.” Stan turned to face him, a frown gracing his features. “It could be another Henry or Patrick. I *know* . But it might not be. It could be zombies. It could be our friends. We *have* to check, right? We have to *know* .”

Bill nodded. “Yeah. We do.”

Richie stared at the sleeping Eddie on the makeshift bed that he’d made for them the night before; confusion setting in. Shouldn’t he have been vomiting? Isn’t that what he’d spent an entire week doing when Doctor Maxwell had injected him with Zirifran?

Why was Eddie just sleeping?

Was he too late?

Was Eddie –

Eddie stirred suddenly and Richie tensed, his hand moving for the pistol at his side. Eddie sat up, looking around before his eyes landed on Richie; confusion settling onto his features. “Richie? What are you doing?”

Richie breathed a sigh of relief and moved his hand away from the pistol. “Eds? How are you feeling buddy?”

Eddie was quiet for a moment, his brow furrowing as he thought about the question. “I feel... weird?”

Richie crossed the room and kneeled in front of Eddie. “Weird how?”

“I’m not... sick? But I feel...” Eddie looked up at him, and he could see the change in Richie’s expression. It was thoughtful, confused, and relieved all at once. “I got bit... I remember that... but I didn’t tell you. I couldn’t... I didn’t know how... and we were running... and then... you...”

“I injected you with the Zirifran Vic gave me but...” Richie was staring at his face, searching for something, his eyes meeting Eddie’s own. “Holy shit... your eyes...”

“What? Are they like –”

Richie was still staring at him, and Eddie’s words faded into background noise. The white ring that he, Jane, and Will all had wasn’t present in Eddie’s eyes but... his smell had changed. It wasn’t so... *alive* anymore. He could still smell the scent of life but it was drowned out with a scent similar to his own. To Jane’s. To Will’s. But the white ring just *wasn’t there* . Instead, it was a bright shade of hazel that was almost... *golden* , blending into the brown of Eddie’s own eyes .

“They’re... so different to mine.” Richie said, confusion laced in his words. “I don’t – but I know I –”

“You injected me. I know. I was there.” Eddie said, staring into the mix of white and blue that made up Richie’s own eyes. “I’m infected now too... right?”

“I – yeah.” Riche breathed. “I’m sorry. That wasn’t something I should have just done without asking you. But I – I couldn’t – I know you wouldn’t want to become that so I –”

Eddie cut him off by surging forward and connecting their lips; fingers desperately grabbing at the front of Richie’s shirt. Richie had

*saved* him. Pulling back, Eddie rested his forehead against Richie's, his mouth curving into a smile.

"Waited a while to do that and now I can. You saved me. Thank you."

"You know, you two should really work on getting a room."

Richie turned sharply at the voice, gun out and pointed at the door. Eddie looked over Richie's shoulder at the doorway, his face breaking into a grin.

"Stan! Bill!"

### 3. Left 4 Dead

#### Summary for the Chapter:

Okayyy, I know I kept you waiting ages for a chapter that's not up to my usual standard and I'm sorry for that. Lately I've been losing motivation for every story for various reasons but two lovely people (tinyarmedtrex and sunsetozier) have been pulling it back up slowly.

Side note: The chances of an update for any of my work starting monday to thursday are going to be very slim as I'll be away on vacation so I'm trying to update everything over the weekend before I go, and I just wanted you all to know that I'm not abandoning these I just won't be here but I will try to write bits for them while away so I can post them next weekend when I return!

The church had managed to hold out over night for Beverly, Georgie, and Vic. Vic paced down the aisle between the two sets of pews silently, his gun resting loosely against his shoulder. He reached the door, turned, and began to pace back towards the front of the church where the altar stood, decorated with a golden cross in the middle and a candle either side.

Vic came to a halt in front of the altar, his jaw clenching.

He'd never had much belief in a god before the outbreak, and whatever belief he *did* have left had vanished the moment that Doctor Maxwell and Doctor Grey had turned him into a monster. He turned sharply from the altar to the pew at the front of the church where his backpack was, grabbing it and rooting around until he found the small leather bound notebook Lucille had given him back at the lab.

He flicked through the pages of zombies quickly as he took a seat on the pew, coming a stop at a worn page that he'd read over many times since he'd obtained the book, his eyes drifting to the bloody

message on the wall.

### **Beware the Hunters.**

Vic looked back down at the page scanning Lucille's neat and cursive writing that covered the page.

**The Hunters appear to be territorial zombies; the most human zombie that we've come across. It's like their brain still works but their instincts have taken over. Hunters travel in packs, protecting their weakest and destroying anything that might cause harm to their friends. Doctor Grey has theorized that the Hunter zombie DNA might contain some answers to the cure. He has ordered one of the patients to be injected with Zirifran H.**

**That patient is Victor Criss.**

Vic gripped at the book with one hand and reached into his backpack for a pen, bringing it to his mouth and uncapping it. He remembered the day he'd walked in on Doctor Maxwell injecting Richie with Zirifran. He'd read the label on the empty vial when she'd handed it to him to toss away. Zirifran H. He crossed out some lines on the page and started to write.

**He has ordered one two of the patients to be injected with Zirifran H.**

**That those patients is are Victor Criss and Richard Tozier.**

Vic turned the page of the book and stared down at the next page before he started to write again, fixing Lucille's unfinished writing.

**Michael Wheeler is dead alive in Atlanta under the care of Doctors Wentworth Tozier and Doctor Jessica Hooper.**

Vic brought a hand to his mouth, coughing violently against the flesh. He lowered his hand quickly, wiping blood onto his jeans. He wasn't stupid. He knew that his body was constantly trying to reject the Zirifran, even now after months of it being in his body. He would either die or become one of those things if he didn't get a cure soon.

"What're you doing?" Georgie's voice suddenly reached him as the

teenager leaned over the back of the pew.

Vic snapped the book shut quickly, stuffing both it and the pen back into his backpack. “Just keeping track of the days.”

Georgie pouted. “And here I was hoping that you had some super juicy diary for me to sneakily poke at some time when you’re sleeping.”

Vic couldn’t help but chuckle. “Sorry kid, didn’t you get the memo? The world ended and there’s no such thing anymore as juicy diaries to poke at.”

Georgie snorted, his expression falling. “If Bill kept one it would be. I’ve seen how he is with Stan.”

Vic turned to face Georgie, his expression serious. “You know I’m gonna get you back to him, right?”

Georgie beamed. “I know! Today, right?”

“Yeah. Go and wake Beverly and we’ll set out. I remember the way we came through.”

“How –”

“Zombie instincts.”

Georgie nodded, no judgement anywhere on his face before he turned and made his way for the pew where Beverly was sleeping. Richie was infected and he was okay. He was safe. So maybe Vic was too. He’d helped Richie escape the lab from what Bill had told him. He’d kept Richie alive after that. He’d helped them with Henry. He’d even kept Mike safe when the horde of zombies had shown up.

Vic *had* to be safe.

“Beverly.” Georgie shook Beverly’s arm gently. “It’s time to get up so we can go.”

Beverly groggily sat up, rubbing at one of her eyes with her now bandaged hand. “Right – yeah – highway.”

Beverly sleepily grabbed her holster and tied around her waist, grabbing her knife and attaching the sheath back onto her leg. Georgie already had his machete tucked into his belt, bouncing to the door of the church to wait for them to follow him. He wanted to get back to the others before they wrote them off as dead.

No.

Bill wouldn't do that.

Bill would wait for them.

For *him*.

Heading back to the highway was less intense in the daylight. The better vision allowed for them to locate certain landmarks easier to help them back to the highway. Vic sniffed at the air, following their previous scent back through the trees until they were back at the spot where Beverly had fallen.

"Okay, this is where you fell and we can't climb up the way we came..." Vic looked left and then right. "We have to go right. See how the ridge starts to dip? If we go far enough we can circle back around to the highway."

"Like you wanted to last night." Georgie said, already heading in the direction that Vic had mentioned.

Vic nodded, remaining silent as they started the trek through the forest, keeping an eye on the ridge above them. A snarl sounded but Georgie was fast; ripping the machete from his belt and slamming it down into the head of a zombie that shambled from behind a tree. The walk back might have been less intense, but it certainly had them on high alert now that there were only three of them.

They had to get back to the highway. Fast.

They broke into a jog, Vic taking the lead as he followed the ridge until it finally met the level of ground they were on, stopping at a road. There was an abandoned car nearby with its trunk popped open and the locks broken off; discarded onto the ground. They passed the car, following the curve of the road as it sloped upwards into an off

ramp that would put them back on the main highway.

“Shouldn’t there be more zombies here?” Beverly asked, panting for breath as they slowed into a walk. “Or do you think... the others...”

“They might have.” Vic said, walking directly between Beverly and Georgie. “There were a lot of them *and* us. It’s also possible any lingering zombies moved on. Everyone scattered in different directions. It would have broken the horde up.”

“So the others will be fine, right?” Georgie asked, looking around nervously at the sound of a snarl. There was nothing, in his opinion, more unnerving than *hearing* a zombie but not being able to *see* it.

“They should be. I don’t think anyone would have come back to the highway while zombies were still there.”

Once they’d managed to regain their breath back enough they broke into a run; weaving in and out of abandoned cars. Vic came to a sudden stop, confusion settling on his face. He grabbed Beverly by the arm to stop her and Georgie came to a stop on his own.

“What’s wrong?” Georgie asked, turning to face him.

Vic looked around, his eyes landing on the empty half of the highway. “They should be *here*. This is the spot.”

“Are you sure?” Beverly asked. “Everything looks the same.”

Vic pointed towards an overturned car. “I remember that car. That’s the car Georgie was checking for supplies when the horde came. I was with him. They should be *here*.”

“So... they *left* us?” Beverly asked, terror seizing her throat. “Why would they – *no they wouldn’t*.”

Georgie jogged towards the empty side of the highway. A few dead zombie bodies greeted him in the middle, along with three bags that all had sheets of paper hastily pinned to them. Georgie recognized the pins as Jane’s hair clips; scanning over the names that had been scrawled onto the bags.



**Beverly, Georgie & Vic**

**Stan & Bill**

**Richie & Eddie**

“Guys! Over here!” Georgie called, grabbing the bag with their name on it and holding it up. “They left this for us.”

“For the others too... that means not everyone got back here...” Vic said, ripping the sheet from the bag and turning it over.

**Tried to stay here but couldn't. Another horde was starting to pass through and we had to get out of here. Dropped whatever supplies we were able to. Meet us in Deming. – Ben.**

“Another horde came through here last night?” Beverly repeated, grabbing the backpack for Bill and Stan and flipping the note up to see it was pretty much like their own; done by Jane with different wording but the meaning was the same. “They didn’t make it back before us. Everyone else is together but Stan... Bill... Richie... Eddie... *they’re still out there.*”

“Hey, calm down.” Vic said, grabbing her by the arms. “The horde already passed through here. We don’t know which way it went but we know it’s *gone*. So this is what we’re gonna do... we’re gonna stay here. We’re gonna wait three days for Bill and the others to show up. If they don’t show up in three days we have to assume the worst and carry on. Three days is all I can give you out here. Okay?”

Beverly nodded. “Okay.”

Georgie chewed at his lip. “If we knew which direction Richie and Eddie went in... we could go find them right now! Eddie’s sick, Vic! They might need more than three days.”

“But we *don’t*. I’m amazed the others even kept track of who was with who. Let alone the direction they went in. Three days, guys.”

Georgie nodded. “Three days. Bill’s gonna be back in three days. I know it. He’s strong. He’s not gonna let this world beat him. None of us are.”

“That’s right. We’re gonna wait for them, meet up with the others, and go to Atlanta. Everything is gonna be okay.”

There was another nod from Georgie. “Right. Cause we’re strong.”

“And we have each other.” Beverly said, tightening her hand around her knife. “As long as we have each other to depend on... we can get through this. We’ll beat this outbreak.”

The snarling sound that had been following them reached them again, cut off by the sound of a gunshot that echoed around them. The three of them tensed, their bodies unwilling to move as they strained their ears. Vic found himself, despite everything, praying to every deity he’d ever heard of that the sound had come from one of their still missing friends and not some random survivors.

Random survivors in an outbreak were a major hit or miss.

“Are you *sure* this is the way? ‘Cause I think we’re fucking lost.”

Beverly’s face suddenly broke into a grin. “That’s –”

“Of course I’m fucking sure, Richie!” Bill’s voice snapped.

“Bill!” Georgie called, looking around to find the direction of his brother’s voice.

“Georgie?”

The sound of rustling greeted them before Bill emerged from a patch of trees to the left of the highway. He looked bloodied and tired, but otherwise fine as he climbed over the crash barrier onto the highway, looking back over his shoulder.

“I told you it was the right fucking way!”

Richie emerged next, a grin present on his face while Georgie clung to Bill, burying his face into his chest. “Never doubted you, Billiam. Now where’s the rest of them?”

“Where’s Eddie?” Beverly countered. “Did he –”

“Eds is fine, ain’t that right buddy?” Richie called into the trees behind him seconds before Eddie and Stan broke through the treeline; bloodied but fine.

“Oh my god.” Beverly was already reaching for Eddie before he was fully over the barrier, yanking him into a hug. “I was so worried about you!”

“I feel like I should be offended.” Richie huffed. “People don’t trust me to take care of my own boyfriend! Seriously though, where the hell is everyone else?” Vic wordlessly handed Richie the note. Richie read over it, his eyes widening. “*They fucking left us to die?*”

“You made that sound worse than it is.” Beverly deadpanned, finally releasing Eddie. “They had to move away because of another horde. It wasn’t safe.”

“But they had long enough to leave us care packages!?” Richie said, balling up the note in his hand. “What kind of shit is *that*?”

“Well this bag is mine, the other looks like it’s Stan’s and I think the other is Eddie’s? They just dropped our things for us and got out of here before anyone died. We know where to go. We just have to get there.”

Richie groaned. “Man I just waded through zombies and trees, at least let me take a break.”

Eddie sighed, reaching up and patting Richie’s head soothingly the best he could. “I think we all need it. There were a lot of zombies in there. More than I remember on the way through.”

“We just ran here so a break doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” Beverly admitted, shouldering her backpack. “And I think it’s safe to assume that *none* of us have eaten since before the horde last night.”

Richie shook his head with a sigh. “Nope. Nothing. My backpack just contains medical supplies and water. Which, fun fact, does not go down as fast when you can share it with someone instead of using up three bottles at a time between four of you.”

“Share – *you infected Eddie?*” Beverly demanded, taking a threatening

step forward. “How could you *do* that? You were supposed to take care of him. He was *sick* not *dying*.”

Eddie stepped between them quickly, pressing his hands to Beverly’s shoulders. “Bev – listen – look at me – I got bit. We were ambushed last night when we were running. Richie gave me Zirifran to *save* me. He didn’t do it because I was sick. I would have turned into one of those things.”

“Bit?” Beverly repeated, looking directly at Eddie. “And Richie...”

“Saved me. Like he’s done with most of us at some point. It’s okay. Stan thought the same as you at first too.”

“I – I’m sorry. I should have known. You wouldn’t – not just for the hell of it.”

Richie shrugged, a lazy smile on his face. “S’alright, red, at least you didn’t *actually* punch me like Staniel did. He, apparently, thinks I would do that for the hell of it.”

Stan rolled his eyes. “I said I was sorry, Rich.”

“Tell that to my eye.”

Beverly narrowed her eyes at Richie, only now noticing there was a faint bruising starting to show around his eye. And then she was laughing. “You’re infected and you let *Stan* beat you? Aren’t you supposed to be enhanced?”

“You’ve clearly never seen an angry Stan.” Richie grumbled, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Given a choice between an angry Stan or a group of zombies? I’d take the zombies. I didn’t even see the punch coming.”

Georgie furrowed his brow. “Eddie’s infected? But his eyes –”

Vic cut Georgie off. “Eddie is a carrier. Richie isn’t. I don’t know what Richie and I are but it’s different in some ways. We were infected with different Zirifran types. Eddie is like Lucille.” His gaze landed on Richie, expression serious. “I need to talk to you.”

Richie tilted his head curiously to one side but said nothing, following Vic away from the others. Once he was sure they were out of earshot, Vic turned to face him, wondering just where he was supposed to begin.

“What’s up?” Richie asked, voice wary. “Look if it’s about what I did to Eddie –”

“No, no, it’s not that.” Vic assured him, gnawing at his lip for a moment. “It’s about what they did to you in the lab. The Zirifran... it was made from the DNA of a Hunter zombie.”

“Is that... bad?”

“Yes... and no.” Vic furrowed his brow. “They’re the most human zombies that the lab ever came across but... they’re also the most dangerous.”

“I was infected with the DNA of the most dangerous zombie!?” Richie hissed.

“I was too. Listen Richie... you’ve taken to this better than anyone so I wouldn’t worry about it too much but... Hunters are pack zombies. It’s weird, I know, and they protect the weakest. I think... that’s why I had to go after Georgie. He’s the youngest. My brain interpreted him as the weakest even though I know he’s not.”

Richie bit at his lip in thought, letting out a hum. “When the horde showed up it was like everything else faded away but... Eddie was sick. Eddie needed to be safe. I *had* to do that. I had to keep him safe. I didn’t know he’d been bitten. And when I saw that bite... I knew I had to save him. There was no hesitation. I didn’t even stop to ask him.”

Vic nodded, digging his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Hunter traits. You’re gonna put him first always.”

“Maybe not. He’s not weak. I know he’s not. It was just because he was sick and then dying. He’s a carrier now.”

“Look, I don’t know all the inner workings of a Hunter’s mind but it’s almost like... an alpha mentality so just... just... *be careful.*”

## 4. Leave

### Summary for the Chapter:

GUESS WHO RETURNED FROM VACATION FULL INSPIRED AND REJUVENATED?

Since you've all been supportive over this AU and I'm celebrating both its popularity and my 300 milestone on tumblr, I've given you all a surprise in the form of a new character! This is my present to you guys! [un-beta'd as always because I am lazy]

### Moms are tough.

It was the kind of line that stuck in a person's head; not unlike the last lines spoken by a favourite character of a movie or video game right before they died.

It was a line that had stuck with Steve even now over a year into the outbreak. It played in his head like a mantra, accompanied with the visual of his mother, gun in hand, standing shoulder to shoulder with Karen Wheeler right before the horde had descended on them; followed by the sounds of Michael Wheeler's screams as he was dragged away and the first zombie had torn into his mother.

Steve shook the memory from his head, focusing on getting back to the highway. The sun had started to set now, and he was pretty sure they'd been turned around three times. Behind him, Jane coughed, covering her mouth with her hand.

Steve could have sworn he saw blood on her hand when she lowered it.

"Over there." Mike said, pointing his crowbar through the thicket of trees where he could just about see something metallic glinting in the setting sun.

A car.

Steve broke into a run ahead to be sure, breaking the edge of the

treeline to see an empty van on its side, dented with broken windows from where it had crashed into the nearby car that was parked on the patch of grass that separated the two halves of the highway, doors thrown open as a result of its previous owner abandoning it.

It was the highway. Steve recognised the crash site. They'd passed it early that morning. He veered off towards the right, squinting to see the same abandoned bus they'd had trouble driving around.

"We're almost there." Steve said as Will hopped the crash barrier and joined him.

Belch carefully helped Jane to climb over the crash barrier as Dustin hopped it with ease, Mike hanging back to make sure nothing stumbled out of the trees to attack them.

"We're okay." Will breathed, chest heaving from jogging to keep up with Steve. "The others should be just around the corner."

"That's right." Steve said, giving Will's shoulder a comforting squeeze. "We'll be back with the others in no time and we can carry on to Atlanta. No more delays."

Will nodded. "And I can get cured and then go back to mom... and everyone back home can be cured."

"That's right. No more fear of infection. A step closer to a world reboot."

It didn't take them long to reach where the highway curved around the woodland, a relieved Ben rushing over when he spotted them; throwing his arms around Mike and hugging him tightly. Steve looked around the highway, his face dropping when he noticed that seven of their group were still missing.

"The others didn't make it back?" Steve asked, his attention fixed on Lucas who was sitting on top of the pickup truck, rifle resting against his shoulder.

"No. You're the first ones to make it back. I'm starting to think –"

"No." Ben said, turning to face Lucas. "They're *fine*. They probably

needed to hunker down somewhere. We're all exhausted, and we don't know how far into the woodland they went."

"We can't stay out here." Max said, voice firm. "In the open like this... it's too dangerous. I'm not saying we just *abandon* them but we can't... just stay here. There's a town *five miles* away. Our best bet is to leave a message for the others, go there, and then find a safe place to rest until we can regroup."

"I'm not leave here. I *can't* leave here. If Beverly comes back –"

"She'll be coming back to a message that we're all safe and where to meet –"

Steve was cut off as a sound rang across the highway. It wasn't quite the snarls of the zombies they'd run into before now. It sounded more animalistic; more of a growl than a snarl, and the sound faded off into a clicking noise.

Lucas was suddenly sitting upright on top of the truck, more alert than he'd been since the start of the outbreak. "What the fuck was *that*?"

"I..." Steve looked around the highway, trying to pinpoint the direction the noise had come from. "I don't know."

"Hunter." Belch said, tossing his backpack into the bed of the truck. "We don't want to be here when it gets here. Let's go! Leave the others some supplies and get in, because the zombies might not be bothered by Will, Jane, or myself but that Hunter? That Hunter is gonna rip *all* of us into fucking pieces."

"Hunter?" Lucas repeated, sliding down the front of the truck until his feet were firmly planted onto the ground. "What's a Hunter?"

"You don't want to know."

"I do. If you're forcing me to have the others come back to an empty highway... we need to know what a Hunter is." Mike said; tone firm.

"It's exactly what it says in the name." Belch looked around warily as the sound carried out again. "And it's getting closer. Dump their bags,



scrawl a note, and let's go. I'm not being torn up by a Hunter. I can't take one of those. The only people who can *aren't* with us... not that I'd want them to."

"I can't leave." Ben said. "I just – I don't expect you to understand but I'm not leaving her."

"I'll drag you away from here by your foot if I have to." Belch warned. "I'd rather you be pissed at me and alive for her to meet up with than liking me for letting you stay and then dying. Beverly wouldn't want you to die out here waiting for her. Beverly would leave a note, find a place, and then wait for you. That Hunter will maul you until there's nothing left of you... and when there's one, there's usually four more."

"Pack zombies?" Jane bit at the inside of her cheek, moving closer to Steve. "Even I can't – *pack zombies*."

"Yeah. They're like rabid animals with some *slight* brain power akin to a human. Like I said, you don't want to be here when they get here."

Ben grabbed Beverly's backpack from the car, rooting around for her notebook before tearing out three sheets. He handed one to Jane and one to Belch, scrawling a quick note to Beverly before clipping it to the handle with the hairpin Jane handed him. Once there were three bags lined up in the middle of the highway, they divided themselves among the vehicles and took off.

Scuffling sounded across the highway as the noise of the vehicles died out into the distance, a single zombie moving in a crouched position. It didn't move like the other zombies, using its hands and feet to walk. The zombie stopped in the centre of the highway where the group had been converged only moments ago, her head tilting up as she sniffed at the air.

With a guttural growl the zombie moved, faster this time, leaping up onto the roof of a car which dented under the force of the land.

A shot sounded across the highway and the zombie tumbled from the roof of the car, lying dead in pool of its own blood. A figure broke the

treeline a few moments later, a small leather book in one hand and a pen in the other as they marked down the sixth and final Hunter they had killed before tucking the items back into their pocket.

Pulling the scarf down from his mouth Jonathan Byers took in a deep breath of the evening air, moving one hand to the snap of the hunting rifle that was resting on his shoulder. The radio on his belt crackled as it picked up a transmission and he strained his ears to listen to the message.

“Safety in numbers... when people become part of us... strong... sanctuary for all survivors... Hortonville.” Jonathan silenced the radio by fiddling with the dial until he picked up a familiar voice.

“Remember guys, when we get to Deming we might need to have a little clear out of the dead.” Nancy’s voice rang out, static taking over as they got further away. “We don’t know how the others will be when they meet us or how long we’ll be there.”

Jonathan looked over to the bags laid out in the middle of the highway, each with different names on them before stumbling his way over and opening the one addressed to ‘Richie’. It was basic supplies; food and water. He moved his hand to the back of his jeans, removing the pistol from there and tucking it into backpack before taking the small book from his pocket again and scrawling a quick note which he slipped into the area where the trigger was.

### **From a friend, be safe – J**

He tore off another page, to write another note as he removed a set of keys from his pocket and wrapped them into the paper, shoving them into backpack with the gun before finally closing it and standing upright. He couldn’t wait in the open to help them. It was dangerous when there was just one of you.

But at least he could make their journey a little easier in some way.

He jogged along the highway and down an off-ramp, passing the same car that Stan and Bill were currently huddled in to rest for the night. A single zombie was loitering nearby, but the darkness around them made it hard for the creature to see the figure running down

the highway and it simply meandered on into the surrounding woodland.

Jonathan breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't have time to keep stopping and disposing of zombies. He needed to keep going. He needed to get to Will. He needed to keep him safe. Help the others get him to Atlanta.

*"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Jessica asked, adjusting her sling and making sure the splints were lined up around her broken arm correctly. "I'd hate to think of you out here alone."*

*"I need to be. I need to get home." Jonathan insisted, loitering in the doorway of the cabin. "I have to go back to Hawkins."*

*Jessica huffed, her brow knitting together. "Listen to me, Hawkins isn't safe. There's a lab there and they're –"*

*"It's all the more reason for me to go back... eventually."*

*"If you change your mind –"*

*"I won't. But thank you."*

*"No. Thank **you**, Jonathan. When the helicopter went down I – I thought we were done for. You saved us. I can never repay you enough for that."*

*"There is **one** way. Make a cure and kick this infection in the face."*

*"You got it! Remember if you ever have to leave Hawkins... there's always a place for you at the Atlanta CDC. I owe you my life. Went's too."*

Jessica would be able to help him. If what he'd overheard on his radio was true, and that Will had been infected, Jessica would help him. She was the only one who could. Jessica was one of the few nice people left, and he'd seen enough of the survivors in this new world to know how easy it was for someone to change drastically.

He couldn't let Will encounter those people.

"How are you feeling today, Michael?" Lucille asked, sitting across the table from the young man who was idly doodling on a sheet of

paper; still unable to get his hand to receive the message to write his name.

“Fuh-ruh-strah-ted.” Michael slammed the pencil down; the sound vibrating against the table as he looked up at Lucille.

“I thought we could try something different today.” Lucille smiled, taking out a small stack of cards and holding one up. “What do you see?”

“Me. That’s... picture... me.”

“Very good.” Lucille placed it face down and held up another. “And here?”

“Wuh-will.”

“You remember Will?”

Michael nodded. “Friend.”

“What else do you remember, Michael?”

“Friend... taken... ex-experiment... Jane... me... Will...” Michael furrowed his brow, and pained expression coming to his face as he tried to realign his memories. “You... Vic... got me out. Said Atlanta... needed dead zombie... left note.” He started to pat at his pockets in a panic. “Note! I lost it!”

“No. Michael look at me. You already gave the note to Wentworth the moment you got here. Remember? It was before I got here.”

Michael furrowed his brow again. “Went... good man. Helps. Medication...”

“That’s right. He’s given you some brain stimulators to try and help you.” Lucille smiled at him again, placing the stack of cards down. “This might hurt you but I need you to try and remember. What *exactly* did Doctor Grey do to you?”

*Screaming echoed in the small room but Doctor Grey just **wouldn’t** stop. He kept returning with new vials filled with different coloured liquids and*

*his tape recorder.*

*“We’re about to see what Zirifran H and J do when combined in a human. Zirifran F seems to have sparked nothing, making me believe that the ferals are children only.”*

“Zih-reh-fran... F... H... J...” Michael winced, rubbing at his arm.  
“C.”

Lucille stared, and for a moment she could have sworn she felt her heart stop.

Feral.

Hunter.

Jumper.

Crier.

## 5. The Calm

### Summary for the Chapter:

We are live and un-beta'd as always.

“They could have at least left us a fucking vehicle.” Richie complained, leaning up against the beaten and bashed Impala that Eddie was currently trying to jump start while Richie kept an eye out for zombies.

“It’s *fine* Richie. I’ll get this started and we can just drive to Deming.” Eddie said, voice muffled since he was under the steering unit, a wire in each hand. “Honestly, it’s not like we don’t have our pick of cars out here, you know.”

“I guess...” Richie said, looking over the highway to where Bill was attempting to get a truck to start to no avail. “I just hate being here, you know? On the road... in the open... on foot...”

Eddie was suddenly sitting upright in the driver’s seat, angled so he could lean out of the car where he grabbed Richie’s hand reassuringly. He could feel the guilt churning around in his stomach. He’d forgotten that Richie had spent more of the outbreak on the road with Stan. He’d barely had a chance to really rest until they’d met. He pulled himself from the car, keeping Richie’s hand in his own as he stood in front of him, peering up at the taller man.

“It’s okay, Richie.” Eddie said, offering him a smile. “It’s not just you and Stan anymore. There’s more of us now.”

“I know, I *know* it’s just...” Richie chewed at his lip for a moment, and Eddie could practically see the gears turning in his head. “It’s not just because of when it was just me and Stan... this is also where the horde split us up from everyone and then you got bit...”

Eddie released Richie’s hand, but only to wrap his arms around Richie, holding him in a tight hug. “It’s okay. I’m alive... because of you.”

“You’re *infected* because of me, Eds.”

“I prefer to look at the up side, Richie. I’m not a zombie, and that’s what matters. You made sure I never became one of them.”

Richie sighed, wrapping his arms Eddie, angling his head down to bury his nose into his hair. Since he’d injected him with the Zirifran, he’d heard the voices less that tried to force him to tear into the other man like he was nothing more than a steak.

Bill joined them after a few more failed attempts to start the truck, covered in oil and general grime. “You have any luck over here?”

Eddie huffed against Richie’s chest. “No, the car doesn’t want to be jump started apparently.”

Beverly heaved a sigh as she came up behind Bill, Georgie at her side. “It looks like we’re walking. Vic couldn’t get one to start either. I guess these cars took too much of a beating.”

“Walking?” Eddie repeated. “To Deming?”

Bill shook his head, curling his hand around the strap over his shoulder attached to his gun. “No. Hortonville. It’s closer. We should be able to find a car there we can take. Did you figure out who the mysterious J is yet?”

Richie groaned, releasing Eddie from the hug. “Nope. I just know it’s not Jane. The writing didn’t match. Which means...”

“Someone else has been watching us?” Beverly asked warily. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s okay, Bev, we’ll just keep moving. Gotta get you back to Ben after all!”

With a collective groan, the group gathered their things and headed in the direction of Hortonville. The lack of zombies was welcome after the horde that had pushed them off the highway into different directions the day before, but it was also unnerving and had them on edge.

There should have been lingering zombies from the horde.

They were thirty minutes into their walk when Stan spoke. "I don't get it. Why would they *backtrack* to Deming instead of pushing through to Westfield?"

"We're sort of somewhere in the middle of them." Eddie explained, idly swinging Richie's hand between them. "They probably figured it was safer to backtrack to Deming since we'd passed through it. Sure, the place is as full of the dead as everywhere else but... there's more of an idea on what to look out for... where to avoid..."

"I hate all this walking." Beverly complained, shuffling alongside Eddie and Richie in an almost zombie like manner.

Richie released Eddie's hand and grabbed Beverly's arm to stop her. At her questioning look, Richie removed his backpack, handed it Georgie, turned, and then crouched slightly in front of her. "Hop on."

"Richie I can't -"

"Beverly Marsh, I am half infused with the DNA of a strong zombie. You're gonna weigh literally nothing now get on before I make Eddie *throw* you on."

Eddie snorted. "I'll do it too."

Beverly sighed and placed her hands to Richie's shoulders, hopping up onto his back as he swung his arms back to grab her legs to keep her secure. "I fucking knew it. You're so fucking light."

Beverly rolled her eyes and slapped him playfully on the top of his head. "Thanks."

"No problem, Bev! I'd do the same for all of you."

"Are you sure you're able to do this?" Vic asked, now walking on Richie's other side. "I know what the first weeks of Zirifran infection is like."

Richie nodded, veering off to follow Bill, Stan, and Georgie down an off-ramp. "I'm fine, Vic. I learned how to tune it out pretty quickly..."



for the most part anyway.”

“If it gets too much just tell me. I’ll take over.”

Hortonville appeared to be empty when they finally arrived on its outskirts. There were no signs of zombies or people anywhere. Richie continued to carry Beverly on his back through the streets, refusing to put her down even when she attempted to slide off his back.

A gunshot sounded as they turned a corner, Richie ducking at an inhuman speed to avoid the bullet that shot through the window of a building behind them.

“What the fuck was that? Did someone just fucking *shoot* at us?” Beverly demanded.

Another shot ran out, followed by a shout, and then another shot.

“Stop! Stop! They’re breathers!” A male voice rang out as the speaker sprinted for them. He came to a halt in front of them, radio raised to his mouth. “I told you stop damn it! It’s seven *people* they’re not dead.”

“Did you see the way that guy fucking moved? That’s not human!” A female voice crackled over the radio.

“Trust me, they’re human.” The man responded, lowering his radio and clipping it to his belt. “I’m sorry about that, we thought -”

“You thought we were zombies.” Vic took a step to the side, blocking the man’s view of Richie. “Would a zombie *carry* someone?”

“Oh you have *not* met a Hunter yet, have you?” Despite Vic standing in front of Richie, the man had already seen the torn and shredded shirt he was wearing. “Or... not one with a meal at least. They don’t just pin you and claw away. They carry their food off to some kind of fucking nest to feed their pack... especially if there’s a weak or injured one.”

“Gross.” Beverly grumbled, now sliding from Richie’s back with surprisingly little resistance as Eddie took a step backwards, putting himself next to Vic.

They couldn't let them see Richie's eyes. Vic's were barely noticeable but the white ring in Richie's eyes had become thicker, the white tint almost completely covering the blue.

The man had took note on the sudden converge in front of Richie, now joined by Beverly as she squeezed herself between Vic and Eddie. "You don't have to protect him like that. We're not gonna hurt you now we know you're alive."

"We prefer to make sure that's not even a possibility." Beverly said, tone firm as she stared the man down. "Your friend *did* shoot at him."

A woman joined them, her face pulling into a grimace. "Yeah I'm sorry about that. I really thought you were a pack of Hunters or something. We've been having a lot of trouble with them lately and you guys were all moving so slow."

Beverly regarded the woman with a frown. "We stumbled off the highway. Richie was carrying me because I was tired and my feet were hurting. We were forced from our friends."

"Well, we haven't had anyone come here for a while so they're not here."

"Oh, we already know where they are." Bill took over, shooting a glance to Beverly. "They're in Deming. We just came here to find a car."

"We can give you a car." The man said, an apologetic look on his face. "It's the least we can do after shooting at you. We can take you back to our community, get you some supplies, food, and a car."

Stan took a step forward, putting himself directly between Bill and Georgie. "I've met my fair share of *unsavoury* survivors on the road. How do we know you won't be the same?"

"We'll let you keep your weapons on you." The woman said. "We're not monsters. We're just trying to take care of people. Look, just come back with us, get some rest. Even if it's just for a night. You really shouldn't travel in the dark. The nocturnals come out and they're the worst thing to deal with. It's like they have night vision."

Look, you can have someone keep watch if you really don't trust us but we *don't* want to hurt you. That guy back there - Richie is it? He just threw me off. He moves like a Hunter."

"Adrenaline." Eddie said quickly, taking a quick step back into Richie. "You shot him and his body reacted. Nothing more."

"Right. Well, let's go then. We'll get you a car and you can go find your friends." The man was smiling at them now, and Stan couldn't see anything fake about it. Not like with the people he'd run into before. "I'm Adrian, and this lovely lady," he slapped the woman on the shoulder with his hand, "is Patricia. Ex-military, and our fucking saviour."

The followed Adrian and Patricia while Bill introduced the rest of the group, Vic dipping his hand into his pocket to retrieve a pair of sunglasses which he held out behind his back towards Richie. Richie took the glasses and pushed them onto his face, covering his eyes from sight, and it was only then that Vic and Eddie changed to walking either side of him rather than in front.

"Do not take those off until we leave here." Vic spoke quietly, enough that Richie could hear him but Adrian and Patricia couldn't. "We don't know how people are going to react to your eyes and I don't really want to find out."

Richie nodded, swallowing thickly. "Right."

Eddie reached out, linking their hands. "It's okay. We won't let anything happen to you." He assured, looking around Richie to where Vic was. "Why is the white *thicker* though? Yours hasn't changed and you have the same Zirifran in you, right?"

"I do... and I don't understand it either." Vic admitted, keeping his eyes trained ahead to make sure that Adrian and Patricia weren't listening in on them. They were busy talking to Bill and Stan about their community; a gated community that they had managed to fortify. "The only thing I can think of is... he's taken more of the infection somehow... maybe he got bit..."

"You *didn't* get bit, did you?"

Richie shook his head. “No, I’d remember that. The only way I could have ended up with more infection is... shit.” He was laughing now, attracting Beverly’s attention who turned and raised an eyebrow at him. “Holy fucking - *of course* .”

“What?” Eddie asked, his brow furrowing.

“ *You* .” Richie looked anything but mad or annoyed. He was still laughing, and he released Eddie’s hand to sling an arm around his shoulders and tug him into his side. “ *You did this.* ”

Eddie blinked, unsure of just what Richie was getting at before it hit him. “Oh my god. I - the kiss - *I’m so sorry.* ”

Richie sobered, squeezing his arm around Eddie. “Damn Eddie, I know you were pissed you couldn’t kiss me but you didn’t have to infect me *further.* ”

“Wait... does this mean... is Richie gonna...”

Vic shook his head. “No he’s not gonna turn. Richie is probably the most successful Zirifran patient to date. Besides... we don’t even know if it was you who did it. It could just be the amount he was given back in the lab. He could still be adjusting to it. I only know what Lucille was able to tell me before I left the lab. There’s still so much I, and she, didn’t know about the drug.”

“Here we are.” Adrian said suddenly, coming to halt in front of a large set of thick wooden gates that were held up by a set of stone pillars which merged into a wall that ran around the outside of the community. “It’s real name is Horton Gardens but everyone here just calls it The Sanctuary.”

## 6. Family

### Summary for the Chapter:

Make the most of this fluffyish chapter because it's going downhill from here.

“Hey, are you okay?” Mike asked as he stepped onto the high balcony of the apartment they’d taken refuge in for the night.

Ben was on watch first, sniper balanced delicately on the railing and one eye poised at the scope as he studied the streets carefully from his chair. “I have to be.”

Mike took the other chair, stretching out with a yawn. “You’re worried about her aren’t you?”

“Yes and no. If I’ve learned one thing since you guys found me... it’s that Beverly Marsh knows how to kick some ass.”

He would never admit to anyone, not even to himself, that being away from Beverly like this was nerve wracking. It felt like one of the very creatures they were killing on an almost daily basis had grabbed a hold of him and started to gnaw away with no signs of letting up any time soon.

And the difference between a mental zombie and a real zombie was that there was no one who could help him. It continued to gnaw away at him, tightening its grip to hold him place.

Ben shook the thought from his head. “How are the others doing?”

Mike shot him a tired smile. “Sleeping for the most part. Belch is keeping watch of the front door and Steve is pacing around nervously. The nights are the worst for everyone.”

Ben agreed wholeheartedly with that. Before they’d found him, he’d spent many nights camping out in abandoned cars praying he would survive just one more night; a good luck charm hanging from the rear-view mirror. It had been a bracelet that had once belonged to his mother; silver and covered in various lucky charms.

He'd given to Beverly the day she'd left with Mike and Bill to push further out for supplies to keep her safe. And that was the day she'd come back safe and sound with two additions to their group, one of which had saved them only a day or two after.

"Especially if you're out on the road." Ben said, tightening his grip on the sniper.

"She'll be fine." Mike assured him, reaching over and placing a comforting hand on Ben's arm. "Knowing Beverly, she got back to the highway, saw the other backpacks, and she's waiting for the others. They'll be back with us in no time."

Ben smiled, adjusting his grip on the gun as a zombie shuffled into the view of the scope. "Thanks Mike."

"Anytime." Mike said as Ben pulled the trigger, only clipping the zombie's head.

"Shit." Ben muttered, adjusting the sniper and aiming again. "I'll never understand how Bill, Stan, and Lucas use these damn things."

Mike snorted, fully understanding how Ben felt. He'd never understood how they used them either. Bill had tried to teach him numerous times but he just *couldn't* get the hang of a sniper despite the fact it was supposed to be easier to use.

The balcony door slid open behind them, a tired Lucas stumbling out with a yawn as he rubbed at one of his eyes. "I came to relieve you so you can get some sleep."

"It literally *just* got dark, Lucas." Ben said, pulling the trigger again. This time he *did* hit the zombie, but the bullet had gone through its neck rather than its head.

*"Severe damage to the head or spinal column is the only way to end the reanimated state of the dead. Remove the head or destroy the brain. We repeat..."* Static emitted from the radio and Ben's mother stood to switch it off.

*It's wasn't like any of them had plans to go out there and fight the things any time soon.*

"You've been on watch all day since we got here, Ben. Get some sleep." Lucas insisted.

Ben relented with a nod, standing and holding the sniper rifle out to Lucas. Lucas swung the gun around, pointed it at the zombie, and pulled the trigger. The zombie dropped to the ground below a window now covered in blood and brain matter.

"You know, people are going to find it weird that you're wearing sunglasses at night." Adrian said, eyeing Richie warily. "It's not exactly normal."

"Tell me something that is normal about this world." Richie grumbled, adjusting the glasses to ensure they were completely covering his eyes, one arm tossed lazily around Eddie's shoulders.

"Leave him alone Adrian." Adrian's husband, Don, shoved him gently with his shoulder. "I'm sure a guy wearing sunglasses at night as some weird ass fashion statement is the least of people's worries these days."

Eddie attempted to bite back his laugh which came out as a snort. He was relieved that Don saw it as a failed fashion sense rather than them hiding something from everyone around them. There was no way they could explain what was going on with Richie without someone jumping to the worst possible conclusion.

Outsiders to their group just wouldn't understand.

"Here you are." Don said suddenly, bringing Eddie back to reality. "This is the only house big enough for all of you but it's a little out of the way of everyone else. If you'd be willing to split up into two houses -"

"This is fine!" Beverly said suddenly, grabbing Don's attention. "I don't want to be split up from anyone in my group. We just met up after being separated. Please you *can't* split us up."

"Hey, hey, it's okay. We won't split you up." Don said. "You can all use this house. I just thought you wouldn't want to be so far away from everyone."

"It might be better that way." Stan said, voice calm and oddly soothing. "Your people... might not be comfortable with us. They might prefer that you put us so far away from them. They'll feel safer."

Adrian furrowed his brow. "But you're not dangerous."

"They don't know that, and they'll never know that. We'll be gone tomorrow anyway."

"Well, alright, here's the key." Don said, handing the key over to Beverly. "We'll come by around midday once everything is packed into a car for you. For now, you should all get what I assume will be the first decent sleep you've had in days."

Beverly thanked him, and the moment the group was inside the house, she closed and locked the door while Richie removed his arm from Eddie's shoulders and took off the sunglasses.

"Shit it's good to see again." Richie sighed, tucking one of the arms of the glasses into his shirt. "I thought they'd never leave us alone and I would have to use Eddie as a crutch forever."

"I hate that we have to lie to them." Stan groaned, running a hand through his hair. "They seem like nice people but -"

"They wouldn't understand." Eddie cut him off quickly. "If they saw Richie's eyes... if we told them... they wouldn't understand."

Richie snorted, lazily draping an arm over Eddie's head. "They'd probably kill me on sight. They already shot at me once."

Eddie reached up and slapped the arm away. "I'm not a fucking armrest!" His annoyance quickly melted when the arm moved back around his shoulders and he leaned into him. "Richie's right though. We shouldn't stay here longer than we have to."

Richie hummed, burying his nose into Eddie's hair. "I'd rather we not stay at all but we really don't have much of a choice in the matter. How are you holding up Bev?"

Beverly sighed, flopping onto the nearby sofa with a soft thump. "I



miss him.”

“I - *we’ll* get you back to him. We’ll rest up tonight, leave tomorrow, and you’ll be back in Ben’s arms before you know it.”

Beverly’s mouth curved into a smile, her eyes darting to where Richie stood and pinning him with a stare. “Thank you - all of you.”

“We’re a family now, Bev.” Bill said, his eyes shifting to the nearby window to check if there was anyone lurking around outside. “We help each other and we stick together. *All* of us, and that includes the people from Hawkings.”

Beverly sat up, the smile still on her face. “I know. I’ve never felt like I was part of a family before... until I met you guys... and I never really thought I could love anyone until Ben.”

Eddie’s lips tugged into a frown. He knew that feeling. His upbringing hadn’t been much better than Beverly’s, and his mother had even tried to get force him to end the one friendship he had.

*“I’ve heard all about that girl, Eddiebear. She’s dirty. Bad news.”*

No. Beverly was neither of those things.

Before the outbreak shed been his only friend. Now, Eddie had a *lot* of friends, but she was his *best* friend. He automatically raised his arms and Beverly grinned, pushing herself up from the sofa and stepping into the open arms, wrapping her own around him.

“I love you Eddie.” Beverly said, ruffling his hair in a playful manner. “All of you. My family.” She reached up, flicking Richie’s nose with a teasing grin. “Even our stray here.”

Richie batted her hand away with a faux frown. “Stan’s a stray too!”

“No, Stan’s the person who *found* a stray.”

“That’s it I’m going back to the funeral home.”

Beverly was smiling again. “No you’re not.”

Richie returned the smile. “No I’m not.”

“You love us.”

“Yeah.”

“We love you too, Stray.” Beverly said cheekily. The group around her laughed.

It was the first time Richie had seen her genuinely happy since they’d left Hawkings. He released Eddie, throwing his arms around Beverly in a hug. “You want to stay with me and Eds tonight?”

Beverly nodded, and Richie tightened his arms around her.

## 7. Hunter

### Summary for the Chapter:

Yall best worship tinyarmedtrex for choosing a victim. It was ALMOST one of the others :)

“Here you go, a vehicle as we promised you.” Adrian said, motioning to an SUV that was parked near the gates as Patricia climbed out, tossing the keys to Bill. “We gave you some food, water, a bit of ammunition. It’s enough to get you to Demming at least.”

“We can’t thank you enough for this.” Beverly said, offering Adrian a smile. “If we had to walk all that way... I don’t think we’d make it.”

“Hey, it’s the least we could do.” Don moved his hand behind his back, taking out a folded map and holding it out to Eddie. “You’re probably gonna need this. We marked off the red zones we’re aware of so it’s better to keep away from them.”

“Red zones?” Bill asked, handing the keys off to Richie.

“Thickly zombie populated areas. They like to stumble on each other and become a herd and a herd is *not* something you want to stumble across.”

“They’re mostly in cities so you should be fine.” Adrian clapped Bill on the shoulder with a grin. “Take care out there. I hope you find your friends.”

“T-thanks, we will.”

Richie adjusted his sunglasses, already climbing into the car to avoid being too close to the people of the gated community. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust them. He just couldn’t risk anyone outside of his friend group seeing his eyes. Eddie was quick to climb into the passenger seat, unfolding the map carefully to check out the red zones.

“Almost every city around us is a damn red zone.” Eddie muttered, chewing on his lip. “Demming isn’t marked. These people either didn’t go there or its safe.”

"I'm sure it's safe, Eds." Richie assured, drumming his fingers nervously against the steering wheel.

The car was silent as Richie pulled out of the community, slowly removing the sunglasses and tossing them over his shoulder to Vic once they were far enough away. Beverly yawned, resting her head against the window; Georgie stretched out on the back row of seats with his head on her lap; leaving Bill, Stan, and Vic in the middle row.

They felt oddly at peace on the road with the lingering zombies. At least they knew what *they* were capable of doing to them. They still had no idea what other humans were capable of in this world and had been lucky with the gated community, though Richie had a pretty good idea on what they were capable of thanks to the Zirifran that was coursing through his veins.

"What the fuck?" Eddie said, his sudden outburst startling Beverly awake.

Vic leaned forward between Richie and Eddie, one hand resting on the headrest of Eddie's seat to keep him steady. There were two mini-vans parked ahead of them sideways on the road with a small cluster of people standing between them. "People? Out here?"

"Don't look too friendly if you ask me." Richie drummed his fingers against the wheel. "What do we do?"

"The most they're probably gonna want from us are supplies and we have that. Stop, give them some, and lets just keep going."

"Glasses."

Vic reached forward and handed the sunglasses back to Richie who immediately put them on, bringing the car to a slow stop; not that he would have had much choice with one of the strangers *flagging* them down as they approached. The burly man stepped forward, and once he stood directly next to Richie's side of the car he reached out to tap the window which Richie instantly wound down.

"This is toll road, my good man. You gotta pay to go through here,

you know? How about you all slowly step out of the car, line up, let us take a look at what you got and no one has to get hurt.”

“If you just tell us what you want, *sir* we can tell you if we have it and we’ll just give it to you.” Richie said, keeping his voice flat.

“Don’t work like that. Out you all get.”

One by one, they climbed out of the car, a tired Georgie rubbing at his eye as he stood between Beverly and Bill. The group in their way contained a total of ten people, and it didn’t take Richie long to notice that one of the women was wearing Max’s jacket. It became apparent just what kind of supplies they wanted, and that their friends had been through here.

That thought was further confirmed when he saw the spiked bat hanging from the belt of another woman as she chatted with one of her companions.

*Scavengers* , Richie realised quickly. This group flagged people down and *robbed* them. They took whatever they wanted from whoever and you couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

The group slowly surrounded them, most likely to stop any form of resistance as the burly man walked down the line. He came to a stop in front of Richie, leaning forward and snagging the silver chain around his neck; pulling it out until he could see the golden ring attached to the end.

“That’s a pretty nice ring you got there. Looks like it’d fit Gretta real nice.”

Richie instantly became tense and Stan grabbed his arm. “Richie...”

“Can’t. Can’t take that. Anything else? Sure. But not that.”

“Come on Brad, have a heart.” The woman with Steve’s bat stepped forward, her boots thumping off the ground. No. *Nancy’s* boots. “We can get a ring off a dead one any day. Let the *kid* clutch onto something that was his mother’s.” Richie bit the inside of his cheek to stop himself from retorting. “I like his sunglasses more anyway.”

Brad nodded and released the necklace, taking a step back. The woman, Greta, stepped forward and grabbed the arm of the glasses. She removed them quickly, letting out a gasp and dropping the glasses to the ground.

“Infected!” Brad shouted, whipping out his pistol and pointing it at Richie, clicks sounding as the group followed his lead and pointed their guns at the others in the line. “You fuckin’ travelling with infected?”

“Richie keep your mouth shut.” Eddie hissed next to him. “Don’t tell them anything.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Greta said, pushing her gun closer to Eddie’s face.

Eddie, who did not appreciate having a gun shoved in his face, glared. “*Get that fucking gun out of my face before I make you eat it.*”

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do. One of you is going to tell me why you’re travelling with an infected before I count to three, or I’m gonna start popping people off.” Brad said, walking the line and waving his pistol in front of the others. “One.”

“I said get that fucking gun out of my face!”

“Two.”

“Richie if you say anything I’ll kill you myself.” Stan hissed.

“Three. Time’s up, *Richard* .” Brad pointed his gun and fired.

It took Stan approximately five seconds to realise that Vic had hit the ground next to him and Beverly screamed. Richie could *hear* his mind go blank, and then there was a snarl vibrating through the darkness.

And he pounced.

Brad had made the mistake of turning his back to focus on Beverly, who he’d chosen to be his next victim, unprepared for Richie who leapt onto his back, arms tightening around throat and cutting off his breath.

*Kill. Tear. Prey.*

Gunshot echoed around the highway, but Richie could barely hear them over the hum of static that was taking over his brain. All he could think about was Brad. Brad who had killed Vic. Brad who had killed saviour.

Brad who was going to kill his friends.

*Preypreyprey.*

*Food.*

Richie sank his teeth into the side of Brad's neck, eliciting a scream from his victim as he broke the skin and then tore his head back; spilling blood from the wound like a fountain. Beverly couldn't do anything but watch in shock (even when Stan tackled her to the ground to avoid a bullet) as Richie dove back in, his body jerking as yanked Brad away from her. Brad's body moved in an almost automated manner, his arms flailing as he coughed up blood.

*Protect pack.*

Richie tore another chunk from Brad's neck, dropping to his feet as Brad's weight gave out and his body crumpled to the floor. But Richie didn't stop - couldn't stop - dropping to his knees next to Brad and wrapping a hand around his throat, squeezing blood out of the wound he'd caused.

The gunshots had stopped now, and the highway was quiet, but still Richie didn't stop, his eyes frenzied as he stared down at his prey; nails digging into the other side of his neck. The static was strong, only the sound of snarls echoing in his mind.

*Devour.*

"Richie!"

Richie's head snapped up, looking around for the source of the shout until his eyes landed on Eddie.

*Prey.*

Richie stumbled to his feet, blood staining his mouth and dripping from his fingers. He was hyper fixed on Eddie, moving against his will towards him in a slow and predatory fashion that was so foreign to him. *Instincts*, he realised. His instincts were taking over his body and all he could think about was...

*Looks like prey.*

***Doesn't smell like it.***

*Fake zombie.*

*You know its prey.*

*Kill it.*

Richie took another step towards him and there was a click as Stan aimed his sniper rifle at Richie. "Don't take another step, Richie. Eddie, *move*."

Eddie shook his head. "Stan -"

"He's not Richie!"

"He is! He's just..." Eddie stared at the bloodied Richie, taking a step towards him. "He answered to his name Stan! Zombies don't do that! He's still in there!"

"Eddie -"

*Prey.*

***Not prey.***

*Prey.*

***Nononono.***

*Yes.*

Eddie was standing right in front of him now, carefully raising a hand to Richie's face. "Richie. Come on. I know you're there."





Richie's jaw. "You're still you. You know that, right? You just did what you *had* to do. No one is going to think any different of you." Richie nodded unsurely as Eddie rubbed against his chin. "So you kept your mom's ring?"

Richie's jaw clenched, but Eddie soothed him once he'd wet the piece of shirt again. "Went back for it... had to... couldn't leave her like that... I... I had to."

The realisation dawned on Eddie. Richie had gone back to end his mother's zombie state. Richie had been forced to put her down. He couldn't sympathise, though he tried. He hadn't been *forced* to put own mother down. He'd done it because she'd attacked him. Because she was a zombie.

He'd enjoyed it. The feel of being free. But Richie cared about his own mother.

"What was your mom like?"

For a moment, Eddie didn't think Richie would answer, and he wouldn't have blamed him. They never spoke about life or the people they knew before the outbreak. "She was great Eds. You would have loved her. She'd have loved you too."

## 8. Bioweapon

The remainder of the ride to the town where the rest of their group was quiet aside from the soft hum of the car engine. Stan was driving now while Bill directed him where to go from the passenger seat, and Richie had fallen to sleep at some point; using Eddie's lap as his pillow.

Georgie was curled up into Beverly's side, sleeping soundly while Beverly read over the pages of Vic's notebook. The soft sound of her turning a page broke through the silence that had settled over them once in a while but other than that no one did anything that would cut through the quiet.

Richie shifted, nuzzling his face into Eddie's stomach as he curled up slightly on the middle row of seats but he didn't wake. Eddie glanced down at him to make sure he was okay, taking in the red stains that still marked Richie's face and hands. No matter how much Eddie had tried to scrub the blood away from Richie's skin it wouldn't leave; not until they could find somewhere with a working shower and some kind of soap at least.

It wasn't until Stan brought the car to a stop that anyone spoke, and that someone was Bill. "Why are you stopping?"

Stan stared out of the window, tapping his fingers against the cool rubbery plastic casing. "They don't know this car, Bill. If we approach them in this they might think we're someone else and hide and we'll never be able to find them. We should walk from here so they can see us."

"He has a point." Eddie spoke up, his fingers running carefully through Richie's hair in slow soothing strokes. "We'd do the same. Especially after... those people back there."

"Right, yeah." Bill said, opening the door and climbing out into the street to do a quick sweep. "Wake them up, let's get our stuff, and go."

Eddie was careful as he woke Richie, explaining the plan to him

quickly. Richie nodded and sat up, allowing Eddie to climb out of the car before he grabbed Steve's baseball bat and followed his lead. The street around them looked empty, and their friends could be hiding in any number of places. Georgie stumbled out of the car while Beverly was pulling on Max's jacket, the notebook still held in her other hand as she continued to read over it.

With their things unloaded from the car they pushed on; trying to find some signs to where their friends could be hiding. They passed a few stores that looked as though they had been broken into at some point, keeping a close eye on shattered windows in case something stumbled or ran its way out of them.

"Hey, guys, I found something interesting in here." Beverly said, folding the notebook over. "Vic didn't write it either. I think that Lucille woman did."

Stan glanced back at her over his shoulder, keeping a nearby store in his peripheral vision. "What's it say?"

"Okay, basically it says that there are different types of Zirifran which we already knew but." Beverly turned a page in the book. "Normal Zirifran is shown to create carriers. That's what Richie injected into Eddie when he was bitten. Listen to this though: The carrier is defined by one simple trait upon appearance. Their eyes are almost golden in colour. Eddie has the golden tint to his eyes. Vic said he was a carrier and it was different to what Richie and he were. There's more too. Carriers are immune."

"What?" Bill came to a sudden stop and Georgie slammed into his back with a groan. "Sorry."

"No you're not." Georgie grumbled, rubbing at his nose.

"Right here. It says that carriers are immune to catching the virus in any way." Beverly said, keeping her attention on the page as the group came to a stop around her. "It has come to my attention that my eyes do not match those of the patients who have been injected with the other Zirifran types. While their eyes are white framed with a black ring, my own have a golden tint to them. I am not like them. Doctor Maxwell has labelled me as a carrier and I have decided to

run some tests in order to see what that entails. I allowed one of the dead to bite me. That was a week ago. The bite mark is still present on my arm but I have shown no changes towards infection. It is safe to deduce that carriers have immunity to the virus.”

“So I’m completely immune...” Eddie said, letting the information sink in. “But the zombies know I’m human. Lucille was bitten by one. It wouldn’t bite her if it didn’t think she was food.”

Richie snorted. “Yeah, you still smell alive but also not alive. I can tell you’re not a zombie by smell. Is there anything in there about -”

Beverly turned a page and scanned it quickly. “Yes. There is. It says here that *those with the eyes of the dead* have been classified by Doctor Gray as *bioweapons* . They’re the perfect mixture of human and zombie. They pick up the traits of the zombie whose DNA is in the Zirifran. In your case it’s the Hunter traits.”

“A bioweapon?” Stan repeated, taking the notebook from Beverly and turning a page. “Holy shit there’s a whole section here on bioweapons. Biological weapons created using the DNA of other creatures. The first Hunter zombie was created by using the DNA of a rabid animal and injecting it into a willing patient... the Hunter broke out of its room and infected people. The first shambling zombie was made by injected brain cells of a dead person into a living person.”

Beverly took the notebook back from Stan, flipping the page. “It was an attempt to eliminate the cancer gene from the body but it failed. It turned people into wild feral beings that only had the desire to feed. Henry was the first successful patient and they labelled him as a bioweapon. This notebook is all out of order but... some of this shit, like the stuff about Henry, dates back to *before* the outbreak. They were going to use bioweapons for a special section of the army but...”

“The outbreak happened.” Richie said, the realisation sinking in. “So why were they still constructing them - us?”

“Them.” Eddie said. “You’re not a weapon. You’re Richie.”

“According to them I’m a weapon.”

Beverly turned another page, clicking her tongue against her teeth irritably. "Because they wanted to reboot the world. They were going to kill all the zombies, and use bioweapons to keep everyone in line. Who would argue with them? No one."

"The more I hear about this, the more I hate that lab." Richie grumbled, shouldering Steve's bat with a sigh. "They completely fucked me up. They altered my DNA and turned me into something that's neither human nor zombie."

"And you smell dead to the zombies." Beverly added, staring down at the notebook. "Which makes you better than a carrier because you can just walk right by them and they don't know any better aside from a select few like the Hunter and the Feral. I get it now. Carriers don't hold the key to the cure." She looked up from the notebook, face serious as her eyes met Richie's. "You do."

Richie grimaced and let out a nervous laugh as they started to move again. "No pressure on staying alive then I see."

"How the fuck would you even die?" Georgie asked.

"I'm immune to the zombie virus and zombies in general, Georgie, not invincible."

"We'll just stick you in a giant hamster ball then." Stan said, drumming his fingers against the strap of his sniper which bounced against his back as they walked. "Can't die in that right?"

Eddie snorted, elbowing Richie playfully. "See, you say that but I'm sure Richie would find a way."

"I don't know if I should laugh or be offended." Richie grumbled as they turned a corner, his face lighting up almost instantly when he spotted a familiar car parked outside of a pharmacy. "Oh my sweet Mustang I missed you!"

"Wait." Stan grabbed Richie by the arm before he could run off. "Are you sure that's the right one?"

"Staniel, I have been driving that thing for a few months. I know it when I see it!" Richie defended, wrenching his arm out of Stan's grip.

“That means some of our friends are in that place.”

“Maybe.” Eddie said warily. “Maybe not. Think about it. Those people back there took clothes and weapons from our friends. They could have taken a car and sent some people into town for some supplies. We don’t know how many people were in their group.”

“Eddie is right.” Beverly said, snapping the notebook shut and tucking it into her backpack. “We have to be careful after -”

“Right, yeah.” Bill agreed. “We’ll move carefully. If there *are* some of the group from back on the highway in there... there’s more of us and they’ll be outnumbered. You good Richie?”

Richie snorted. “I don’t feel all *zombie must kill human* mode if that’s what you mean Billiam.”

“Yeah, I was trying to put it in a nice way.”

“Sorry. Hey, what about if I go first? I have the whole *enhanced senses* thing going on and I know your scents by memory.”

Stan grimaced. “That’s... not invasive or creepy at all. Okay, but take someone with you just in case.”

“I’ll go.” Beverly said, removing the shotgun from its place hooked around her shoulder. “I’ll fire a shot if there’s a problem.”

“Be careful.”

Beverly nodded and then she took off with Richie; jogging towards the pharmacy. The door had been broken from its hinges at some point, and the two of them stepped into the store; Beverly keeping an eye on their left and Richie their right. So far the place seemed to be empty; not even a zombie in sight.

A sudden clang from the storeroom caught their attention and directed them towards it. Richie went first, Beverly covering him from behind as they made for the partially opened door.

“What if it’s not them?” Beverly hissed.

"Then you fire at the ceiling and alert the others." Richie hissed back, reaching out for the door.

He had not expected it to open the second his fingers grazed the wood to reveal Steve on the other side; looking as confused and relieved as they did to see someone friendly and not someone after all their stuff.

"Holy fucking shit." Steve breathed. "You're alive."

"Yeah." Richie held the bat out to him quickly. "I believe this belongs to you."

"Steve? Who's out -" Ben's sentence died in his mouth as his eyes locked onto Beverly, relief instantly washing over his face. "Beverly."

Beverly smiled, and Richie could see that she was close to crying. "Hey. It's been a while."

Ben rushed forward, squeezing by Steve and wrapping his arms around Beverly, holding her tightly against his chest. "I was so worried. I thought -"

"I know." Beverly said, sobbing into Ben's shoulder freely. "I thought the same about you until I saw your note on the highway. Then I knew you were still alive and I had to keep going. Your note kept me going. I'm so glad you're okay."

"Where did you get this?" Steve asked, weighing the bat in his hands. "Don't tell me you -"

"Ran into your little muggers?" Richie asked. "Yeah. We met them."

"How'd you get our stuff back?"

"I -" Richie motioned to his face that which was still stained in blood. "I had an episode or something and took out their leader."

"The others?" Nancy asked, appearing at Steve's side.

"Outside. Shook up but alive. They killed Vic."



“They almost killed Lucas too until Steve handed over the bat.”

Beverly pulled away from Ben, rubbing at her eyes with her fist.  
“Nancy. Your brother. He’s alive.”

## 9. Reunion

Richie stared at the dark ceiling above him, tracing the odd streak of light that came from the moon outside; penetrating through the cracks in the boarded up window. Everything since they'd run into Steve at the pharmacy was a blur aside from the odd fragments that stuck out; allowing Richie to build *some* kind of memory from the day before.

He vaguely remembered them reaching the apartment the others were holding up in, and Mike's clear relief that they were still alive even if Richie *was* covered in blood from the assault on Brad. He remembered that the shower worked and he'd managed to scrub the blood off him while Eddie found him some clothes in one of the bedrooms before dragging him to a bed to sleep.

But washing away the blood didn't wash away the memory of what had happened on the road. For a brief moment, Richie had turned into a monster, and that was something he hadn't wanted to happen. He saw how the others looked at him now; Eddie with concern and Stan with worry and slight distrust.

Beverly and Ben were the only ones who *didn't* look at him like that. They looked at him with nothing but pure gratitude for saving Beverly's life. Eddie's concern was different to the others too, and he knew that. Eddie's concern was for *Richie's* well being and not for the well being of everyone else like Bill's was.

*That doesn't mean they trust you though. Beverly and Eddie know what you are. The whole group does. You're a monster. A Hunter zombie. You're not even a **good** Hunter either. You couldn't save Eddie from being bitten. You **infected** him. You couldn't save Vic either. He died. You only saved Beverly by **luck** because Brad's attention was on her and he didn't see you coming.*

Richie clamped his hands over his ears, screwing his eyes shut as he tried to block out the voice. Jane had told him back in Hawkins that the voice would go away eventually like it had done for her, but so far it just seemed like the more infected he was, the worse the voice became.

The bed shifted and Richie opened his eyes to see Eddie slinging a leg over him until he was straddling him; concern clear on his face again. He didn't fight it when Eddie's hands curled around his wrists and slowly pulled his hands away from his ears, Richie's fingers untangling from his hair as Eddie leaned down and pecked at his nose.

"You were mumbling pretty loudly." Eddie said, thumbs circling against Richie's wrists soothingly as he placed them either side of his head. "You need to stop thinking like that. You're not a monster and you didn't fail anyone."

Richie's stared up at Eddie, his brow knitting in confusion. He hadn't realised that he'd been saying anything out loud, assuming that it was just the same voice that kept telling him to tear everyone up into little pieces like sheets of paper.

"Eds -"

Eddie frowned, nudging a knee roughly into Richie's side. "Don't you 'Eds' me, Richie. Without you I would have turned into a zombie, and Beverly would be dead. As for Vic? You couldn't prevent that. There was no way we were about to let you tell some strangers why you look the way you do."

"Eds if I wasn't like this... if I hadn't run out of that alley back... he'd still be alive. He died *because* of what I am."

Eddie sighed, lacing their fingers together against the pillow. "You don't *know* that Richie. If you weren't like this... worse things might have happened. Jane and Will might *still* be in that place being experimented on. The lab might have gotten *Georgie* instead. I'd definitely be dead. One bad thing that happened doesn't outweigh all the good stuff that's happened and *nothing* is your fault."

Richie opened his mouth, a protest on the tip of his tongue when a loud slam made them both flinch and turn their attention to the still closed door. "What the fuck was that?"

"Whatever it was, it can't be good."

Eddie scrambled off Richie and jumped from the bed, Richie following suit as he crossed the room and threw the door open; forcing them to shield their eyes from the sudden lighting in the hallway that flooded the room. Once their eyes had adjusted to the sudden bright light, they could see Bill standing in the doorway of his own room, and the lack of Georgie or Stan suggested they were both still sleeping.

Max stood in the middle of the hallway, her pistol aimed at the apartment door as another slam sounded while Lucas peered through the peephole to look outside. Carefully, he raised a hand towards Max, curling his hand into a fist save for two fingers.

“Will the door hold?” Max hissed.

Lucas took a step back from the door and turned to face her with a shrug. “I’m not sure but there’s only two of them out. Looks they stumbled out from another apartment.”

“It took them *this* long to realise we were here?”

“We weren’t exactly quiet when we came back last night.” Eddie supplied, sending a wary glance to the door. “We should take care of them before they attract more.”

Lucas shot a glance to Eddie. “We should absolutely *not* do that. If we open that door they could grab someone.”

“If we don’t they’ll attract more.” Richie snapped. “It only takes one to know you’re in a place before a horde shows up and I’m not about to let thirty of those things build up because *you* think two will be a problem.”

“If a horde builds up we’ll get trapped in here.” Max lowered her gun, her attention fixed on the door as another slam sounded.

“So we just *let them in* because Richie says so? We don’t even know if there are any others in the immediate area.” Lucas retorted, glancing back over his shoulder at the door. “I’m not risking that when there’s only *two* .”

The sound of a snarl cut through their argument, followed by a

thump as something hit door. The silence that followed was unnerving, and only Bill made the walk to the door to check outside through the peephole. Two dead zombies now lay in the foyer of the apartment block's sixth floor, a hooded man standing between them with a crowbar in one hand while there was a screwdriver protruding from the head of the other.

The figure turned to face the door, the bandanna covering their face making it impossible to see who they were. They stared at the peephole almost intently, head tilting to one side.

Bill took a few steps back from the door, turning to the small group gathered in the hallway. "There's someone out there. Survivor."

"Just the one?" Eddie asked, confusion ringing clear in his voice. "We can't leave them out there."

"They seem capable enough."

"It's *one* person, Bill. They could die out there."

"They could be dangerous Eddie."

"We outnumber them like fifteen to one." Max defended. "We can overpower them if it comes to it but we *have* to take a chance. Not everyone can be bad. Vic and Belch weren't."

"Adrian and Don weren't." Richie attempted to reason.

"And Richie and Stan weren't dangerous either. Not everyone is and I'm not leaving someone out there *alone* to become zombie food." Eddie pointed out, tone firm as he pushed by Bill to the door.

Eddie hastily removed the chain and slid the bolt across, Max raising her gun as he slowly opened the door. The man on the other side tightened his grip on the crowbar almost warily, taking a step back from Eddie with a furrowed brow.

"Hey, it's okay." Eddie said, attempting to keep his voice soothing. "We won't hurt you."

Slowly, the man brought the crowbar to his body, clipping it onto his

belt before taking a step forward. Eddie stepped aside to let them into the apartment where Max kept her gun trained on him while Eddie closed the door and bolted it back up.

“Show your face.” Max ordered. The man complied, slowly raising a hand to his face and pulling the bandana down. Max’s arms lowered, the gun slipping from her hands where it hit the floor with a clatter. “Holy shit.”

“Hey, Steve asked me to tell you guys to keep it do-” Will stopped in the middle of his sentence, frozen in the doorway with one hand curled tightly around the handle.

The silence that stretched over them was intense. Will’s hand dropped from the door handle to his side, and then he was movie in fast strides across the space to where the man stood; throwing his arms around him tightly.

“I thought you were dead Jon!” Will shouted, his voice muffled into his chest as he slammed his fist against his back. “I thought I’d never see you again.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Jonathan said, wrapping his arms around his younger brother.

“Where the hell have you been all this time?” Max asked, retrieving her gun from the ground. “Everyone thought you’d died when the cities went down.”

“I couldn’t leave the city. There were people constantly being flown into the hospital. I stayed until the hospital was overrun and then left. I was hiding out in a cabin when a helicopter from Nouvelle went down. I had to take care of those people first. The pilot didn’t make it but the doctors on it did. When they left I started to make my way home, blending into hordes which is how I came across you. You were all scattering from the highway so I followed you with this.” Jonathan removed the radio from his belt. “One of you dropped it in the chaos.”

“That looks like Georgie’s.” Max said, taking the radio from Jonathan and looking it over. Unlike the rest of the radios it was caked in dried

blood that chipped away when her nails caught it. "He must have dropped it when he jumped the barrier after Beverly."

"The kid in the yellow hoodie? Yeah, he was the one who dropped it. I saw it fall out of his pocket when he jumped the barrier and the guy who followed him didn't notice. I grabbed it and followed but I lost them in the forest so I used the radio to track you guys down. Why are you even out here, Will? You should be back home."

"Because Will is infected on a high level with something called Zirifran." Steve cut into the conversation, now standing in Will's previous place in the doorway. "It's good to see you're alive, Jonathan, though you look a little gross."

"Comes with the whole *blending into hordes* thing." Jonathan said, smiling almost nervously. "Good to see you're alive too. Now do you mind telling me how my brother ended up infected on a high level?"

"He's not the only one." Max indicated to Richie. "He's infected too, and so are Eddie and Jane. The lab in Hawkins... it took him when we were on a run and used him as some kind of experiment. They can't turn."

"We're trying to get them to Atlanta for a cure." Steve sent a questioning glance to Richie who nodded. "Richie's dad's there. He's a CDC doctor who is trying to find a cure but according to some Lucille woman... they need people like Will and Richie. They bonded with the Zirifran on a cellular level."

There was something about the look on Jonathan's face that told them the next words out of his mouth wouldn't be good. "They're not the only ones either. I take it you haven't come across the Blenders yet."

"Uh, Blenders?" Eddie repeated.

"They look like the dead but they're not, and they attack just as viciously. They roam in hordes and attack the living for their supplies."

"For their supplies?" Steve furrowed his brow. "They can't just *ask* a

group for spare food?”

“Haven’t run into many survivors in this world have you? Blenders are beyond our help. The only supplies they want from people like us are clothes and weapons. They don’t care about food.”

“So then... how do they survive? What are they eating? Wild animals?”

Jonathan shook his head. “Worse. They eat *us* .”



## 10. Horde

The sounds of gunshots and snarls filled the air, followed by the odd whoosh of Eddie's machete as he swung at any corpse that stumbled towards him. He kept a firm hand on Stan's arm which hung around his neck, digging his fingers into his hoodie to keep him close. Stan was barely responsive to Eddie's touch aside from the odd twitch, blood covering the entirety of the left side of his face.

He stumbled alongside Eddie whenever he moved; fingers flexing against his jacket. Eddie shifted his machete wielding arm around Stan's neck, using his shoulder as a perch for his elbow to drive the blade forward into the forehead of an oncoming Runner.

"Hang on, Stan." Eddie urged, swinging his arm to the right and lodging the blade into the head of another zombie. It had started as a simple plan to get into the main part of town, get supplies, and get back to the apartment block to load the cars and leave, but the apocalypse had other ideas.

The horde had shown up so fast that it had overwhelmed them and when a Hunter had managed to grab hold of Belch, his finger had squeezed the trigger of his gun as a reflex and the shot had hit Stan in the face. Eddie had been the only one to see the bullet hit in the chaos, and the lack of an exit wound told him all he needed to know.

The bullet was still in there and Stan could survive as long as he could get him to Nancy.

"Just... hang on." Eddie continued to urge, pulling his machete back. Blood splayed from the zombie's head and it crumpled to floor, revealing a familiar bloodied yellow hoodie in the mass of reanimated corpses. "Georgie!"

Georgie turned sharply at the shout of his name, face covered in blood from the countless zombies he'd taken down on his own while trying to find someone. "Eddie! Where's Bill?"

Eddie adjusted his grip on Stan, shouldering a zombie away roughly which stumbled into the one behind it knocking them off kilter. "I

don't know! Where's Richie?"

Georgie ducked around Eddie to stand behind him, slamming his back into Eddie's with a thump to keep their blind spots covered. "I saw him tackle the Hunter but then I lost sight of them in the horde. It *knew* , Eddie. It knew Belch wasn't a zombie! It knows Richie isn't too!"

Eddie nodded despite the fact that Georgie couldn't see him. "Richie will be fine. *We* need to find the others. We need to find *Nancy* ."

Georgie tightened his grip on his pistol, scanning the immediate area in desperation. He couldn't see anything but zombies around them and the remains of what had once been Belch spilled out onto the floor. They had to get out. Had to find the others. Had to get Stan to Nancy. Had to -

*Crunch* .

The zombie standing directly in front of Georgie suddenly collapsed to the ground, revealing Steve as he slammed his foot into the zombie's shoulder; yanking the bat backwards to dislodge the nails from the corpse's head with a loud squelch.

Eddie turned to see who had joined them, relief filling his face as Steve passed his bat to Georgie and reached out for Stan. He handed Stan over to Steve without a fight, allowing the taller man to hoist the barely conscious Stan over his shoulder where he secured him in place with an arm around his waist.

"The movie theatre." Steve ordered, roughly shouldering a zombie backwards from Eddie. "Some of the others are in there! Go!"

Georgie swung out the bat, hitting the nearest zombie as Eddie pushed ahead through the horde, hacking away at anything that came near them. Across the street he could see a bloodied Beverly holding a door open, the horde passing her as if she wasn't even there. Eddie slipped by her into the darkness of the theatre; barely lit by someone's flashlight on the counter.

"Eds!"

Eddie suddenly found himself wrapped in Richie's arms, breathing in the confusing mix of the human and zombie scent that came from him. *Richie was okay*. He was covered in blood again and what looked like scraps of flesh and someone's brain, but he was okay.

Steve carefully set Stan down onto the floor, propping him up against the counter where Dustin sat with another flashlight in hand. "Nancy!"

Nancy appeared from behind the counter, blood covering most of her face and arms. "Right here."

"He needs your help."

Nancy's eyes landed on Stan, concern and fear suddenly crossing her face. "What happened to him?"

"It was that Hunter Richie tackled." Georgie panted, holding the bat out to Steve. "It got Belch and he fired his gun and..."

Eddie visibly flinched. "There's no exit wound. The bullet is still in there."

"Okay, I can - I can try to help but this kind of injury... even before the outbreak..." Nancy dropped her backpack next to Stan, rooting through it for her first aid kit. "I don't know if I have the stuff he's gonna need. I don't have any anesthetic or painkillers for this."

"But if we leave him like that for too long -"

Nancy dropped her first aid kit to the floor with a thud. "I *know* Eddie. I'm gonna do the best I can with what I have which isn't much. Richie, I need to you to keep him still. You're the only one who can. Just... sit on him and keep him pinned so I can work."

Richie complied, helping Nancy to move Stan so he was lying on the floor before he settled onto his stomach and pinned his arms at his sides. There was a sudden weight as someone leaned against his back, and Richie glanced over his shoulder to see Georgie sitting on Stan's legs and pinning them to the ground.

Jonathan and Steve left with strict instructions for Beverly to close

the door behind them and wait for them to knock before opening it again. Beverly nodded, a clang sounding as she slammed the door behind them.

“Keep a tight grip on him guys.” Nancy ordered, removing a pair of tweezers from her kit. “I’m gonna dig in there and get the bullet out. Dustin, I need some water, a clean rag, some bandages and some gauze.”

Eddie dropped his backpack next to Nancy with a thump. “We have all that in there.”

Nancy nodded, face contorting into a grimace. “Listen, I don’t want to get anyone’s hopes up on this. Even before the world ended this was a finicky operation and we had all the machines and stuff we needed for it. Survival would have been sixty percent at best. Now? It’s ten or twenty percent... maybe even five.”

“But there’s still a chance.” Beverly assured her. “And as long as there’s a chance... we should try. Right?”

Nancy smiled, moving some of the hair from Stan’s face to reveal the hole where his eye should have been. “Yeah. We should. Here we go.”

Richie flinched at the scream that followed Nancy pushing the tweezers into the remains of Stan’s eye; digging his fingers into his shoulder.

Max slammed the butt of her sniper into the face of an oncoming Runner, swinging the gun around quickly while plunging a hand into her pocket for some of the bullets she kept on hand. One of the zombies shot forward, grabbing onto Max who span her sniper around in her hands so it was sideways before shoving it into the corpse’s mouth. The zombie snarled and bit down on the gun as it pushed forward in an attempt to reach her.

A shot sounded in the mass of snarls, and the zombie slumped forward. Bill grabbed the back of the zombie’s shirt and yanked it back before it could knock Max off kilter, tossing it carelessly to one side where it crumpled to the ground.

“Get to the movie theatre!” Bill ordered, slamming his elbow backwards roughly into the chest of another zombie which stumbled backwards.

“No! Not without the others!” Max shouted. “You can’t save them all on your own, Bill. You’ll die if you try!”

The horde was closing in, the snarls and stench of rotted flesh filling the air. Bill turned sharply and slammed his shoulder into the jaw of a zombie that was too close to them. “The Pharmacy! That’s where I saw Jane and Ben!”

“Right.” Max swung her sniper onto her shoulder, reaching for her combat knife. “No guns. They attract too much attention.”

A small cluster of zombies passed the Pharmacy, paying no attention to the three people inside. Jane stared out the glass door, one hand curling around the strap of the bag she was holding. The shooting had started to die down now, which meant that either everyone had died or they’d switched to something less likely to grab attention.

“Why are they just passing by?” Ben asked, shouldering his backpack. “Shouldn’t they be trying to break down the windows and door?”

“It’s us.” Will said, taking a step towards the door and placing his hand against the glass. A nearby zombie stopped and sniffed at the air before continuing on its way. “Jane and I smell like them. They don’t care about us. As long as you’re far back enough our scent is covering you and you’re safe.”

“We can wait out the horde.” Jane suggested. “And then when it’s gone we can go and find the others. I saw Steve taking Beverly and Nancy to the movie theatre and come back out but... I lost track of him in the horde. Lost track of Eddie and Stan too. I’m sure Eddie got him somewhere safe though. Eddie wouldn’t just ditch him in the horde and keep going. He’d try anything and everything to get him help.”

“Yeah you’re right. Did you see where anyone else went?”

“No. The last I saw of Lucas... he was on one of the rooftops keeping

watch. He'll be okay up there. I lost Mike in the horde right after Jonathan reached him. There's just too many of those things out there."

Will heaved a sigh, staring at the passing cluster. "I don't think waiting them out will work. We have to get out."

"There's a *Hunter* out there! We can't risk it coming across us. It knows that we're not like them. It pounced on Belch and tore into him. He was more infected than we are."

Nancy stared down at Stan, dropping her tweezers to the floor. Her fingers were covered in blood and god only knew what else, but the main thing was that she got the bullet out. The only problem now was that his breathing was so slow and barely noticeable that she had no idea if he was going to survive.

"What's the verdict?" Dustin asked, watching Nancy as she worked on wrapping bandages around Stan's head, pinning the gauze tightly into place.

Nancy sighed, brushing some of Stan's hair out of the way as she brought the bandage back around the front. "It's up to him now."